

# Sexualized Bodies in Canadian Women's Short Fiction

A Dissertation

Submitted to the

College of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

Department of English

University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

By

AMELIA HORSBURGH

2016

© Copyright Amelia Horsburgh, 2016. All Rights Reserved.

## PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this dissertation in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my dissertation work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this dissertation or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this dissertation in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5  
Canada

OR

Dean  
College of Graduate Studies and Research  
University of Saskatchewan  
107 Administration Place  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A2  
Canada

## Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine short stories by Canadian women writers from the 1970s to the 2000s to answer three overarching questions. First, I analyze, using various theories of corporeality, how bodies of female characters in these short stories perform a wide range of acquiescence and resistance to dominant Western ideals of female beauty. Second, I investigate the relationships between women characters' gender, sexuality, social class, culture, and age, and their ability to engage in a variety of acts of compliance and defiance through such methods as food restriction, binge and purge, and surgical procedures. Third, I query the linguistic techniques and narrative devices of the short story genre that facilitate Canadian women writers in their exploration of the postmodern body's fluctuating pleasure, distress, satisfaction, shame, and ultimate instability.

The bodies of the female characters in these stories sometimes demonstrate the painfully strict and cumbersome social construction of the feminine body as mandated by Western hegemonic ideals. However, many of the characters devise and utilise specific stratagems to bypass or circumvent the restriction of their bodies, bodies that are perceived to be outside societal norms by the male characters or by society at large. The female characters' bodily experiences, such as body modification, nudity, and abjection, demonstrate both the innate power of the corporeal, and the difficulty of controlling the message of their performances as understood by masculine watchers. The women resist dominant Western ideals of femaleness and sexuality through varied means, such as embracing an embodied and lived sexuality, making alterations to the appearance of their bodies, or accepting their bodies as unstable and ever changing. These same modes of resistance can and sometimes do hinder the characters' capacities to inhabit their bodies. The fluidity of the body is both painful and exhilarating to the

female characters as they seek bodies and gender performances that align with their life experiences of being both in and of the world.

## Acknowledgements

My love and thanks to my husband Justin Ymana and son Saul who have supported me through my doctoral studies with unwavering enthusiasm. I thank my parents Dr Martha (Beth) Horsburgh and Greg Horsburgh, my parents-in-law Cris Ymana and Valerie Ymana, my sister Jessica Horsburgh and brother-in-law Ben Woods, brother Thomas (Chad) Horsburgh, and brother-in-law Glenn Ymana, for their love and encouragement.

A very special thank you to my supervisor extraordinaire, Dr. Wendy Roy, for her encouragement and supportive feedback throughout my doctoral studies. I also wish to thank my committee members for their thoughtful comments and questions: Dr. Steffler (External Examiner, Trent University), Dr. Muri (Graduate Chair), Dr. Lynes (Specialist Examiner), Dr. James-Cavan (Departmental Examiner), Dr. Biggs (Cognate Examiner), and Dr. Misra (Dean's Designate). My thanks to the faculty and staff from both the Department of English as well as the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching Effectiveness for their encouragement as I completed each step of my PhD.

I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without the loving care provided for my son by countless family, friends, and early childcare professionals. My sincere gratitude and thanks to the childcare workers at the CSMFRC (Central Saskatchewan Military Family Resource Centre) Child Care Centre, Tykes & Tots Early Learning Centre, and the Centre Éducatif Félix le Chat. Also a big thank you to the world's greatest neighbour, Joan Linklater, for watching Saul on numerous occasions when I had to attend afternoon meetings on campus and for supplying us with a constant supply of homemade buns and jam.

## Dedication

I dedicate *Sexualized Bodies in Canadian Women's Short Fiction* to my maternal grandparents and biggest cheerleaders Douglas James Chadwell (1920-2012) and Doris Chadwell (1923-2013). The world's best grandparents!

## Table of Contents

PERMISSION TO USE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
DEDICATION .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
Introduction: Sexualized Bodies in Canadian Short Fiction.....	1
1. "I Tie It Up with a Bright Red Ribbon": The Gift of Transgressive Corporeality in Margaret Atwood's "Hairball" and Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North" .....	35
2. "Nipples are no-nos": The Mastectomized Body in Bonnie Burnard's "Nipple Man," Carol Shields's "Eros," and Linda Svendsen's "White Shoulders" .....	60
3. "I Only Throw Up Dinners": The Anorectic and Bulimic Stance as Parody in Margaret Atwood's "Spring Song of the Frogs" and Madeleine Thien's "Alchemy" .....	91
4. Performing Female Heterosexuality: The Teenage Body in Elisabeth Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine," Bonnie Burnard's "Crush," and Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge" .....	122
5. "My Body is My Canvas": Transforming and Performing the Female Body in Marian Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" and Barbara Gowdy's "Ninety-three Million Miles Away" .....	163
Conclusion: .....	193
Works Cited .....	206

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Dante Rossetti, <i>The Annunciation</i> .....	105
Figure 2 William Hogarth, <i>The Shrimp Girl</i> .....	132



## Introduction:

### Sexualized Bodies in Canadian Women's Short Fiction

A woman's performed femininity is a tool of power. She uses it both unconsciously and consciously to influence, control, and command. Judith Butler understands gender, including both femininity and masculinity, as a "*corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (190). The meaning of the performance is conditional on the audience and time period of the act, what Butler calls "*social temporality*" (191). In the twenty-first century, a woman's performance of femininity is continually both formed and assaulted by Western societal tropes about the body and sexuality. Problems associated with women's bodies and body image are compounded, corrected, and complicated again as women and others in their social world attempt to understand their complex bodily relationships.

If, as Butler believes, gender is performative, how are women's bodies and performances of femininity defined and controlled in ways that disempower them? Take for instance the news that the Pirelli company, known over the last fifty years for its titillating calendar photographs of women's flesh, created a calendar for 2016 that is filled with mostly clothed, highly accomplished women. This is a shrewd move to be sure, as columnist Sarah Hampson writes for *The Globe and Mail* that since "nudity has long since lost its cultural shock value, the most subversive thing you can do is create a pin-up calendar with real people in regular clothes" (par. 10). The suggestion that it is *avant-garde* or innovative to use photos of women *in* their clothing demonstrates just how deeply Western culture uses the female body as a commodity. Women's bodies are goods, products, and services, and both men and women are aware of the value and

power of the female form. Power, or attempts at power, can be made through women's bodies, with the stipulation, as Butler notes, of an audience. Reading and reflecting on literary works can help us to think about complex ideas of performativity, the body, and power. In works by women authors, female characters sometimes attempt to perform power via their corporeal performances of femininity for a specific masculine audience. The reader observes these performances as acts that sometimes facilitate growth and the attainment of power, and that sometimes hinder and fall short of these goals depending on their "*social temporality*" (Butler 191).

In this dissertation, I examine short stories by Canadian women writers from the 1970s to the 2000s to answer three overarching questions. First, I analyze, using various theories of corporeality, how bodies of female characters in these short stories perform a wide range of acquiescence and resistance to dominant Western ideals of female beauty. Second, I investigate the relationships between women characters' gender, sexuality, social class, culture, and age, and their ability to engage in a variety of acts of compliance and defiance through such methods as food restriction, binge and purge, and surgical procedures. Third, I query the linguistic techniques and narrative devices of the short story genre that facilitate Canadian women writers in their exploration of the postmodern body's fluctuating pleasure, distress, satisfaction, shame, and ultimate instability. Together these stories highlight how women can improve their perceptions of their bodies and see and understand their bodies from a first-person perspective and not through a skewed third-person ideal. These stories ask readers to consider female bodies as *mine* or *ours*, as sites that are powerful and can be experienced and relished without the suffocating pressures of hegemonic norms. Such norms, frequently delivered using third-person pronouns such as *she*, *her*, and *its* to describe the body, can and do create fractiousness and unease between people's sense of self and the body sites they inhabit.

The female characters in these stories use their bodies to perform or to question gender power in various ways. Margaret Atwood's "Hairball" and Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North" focus on grotesque aspects of female reproductive power, while Linda Svendsen's "White Shoulders," Carol Shields's "Eros," and Bonnie Burnard's "Nipple Man" examine breasts and breast loss in relation to sexual power in heterosexual couplings. In Atwood's "Spring Song of the Frogs" and Madeleine Thien's "Alchemy," disordered eating plays a pivotal role *vis-à-vis* the theme of consumption and exemplifies a failed attempt to perform asexuality as powerful, while the teenaged performance of femininity for the hetero-masculine gaze is explored in Burnard's "Crush," Elisabeth Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine," and Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge." Finally, in Marian Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" and Barbara Gowdy's "Ninety-three Million Miles Away," female characters use their bodies as a means to speak and sometimes transcend their limited conditions.

Written, broadcast, or published from 1975 to 2005, these stories arise from the context of second-wave feminism, tackling issues such as sexuality, the role of women in the family (both mother and daughter figures), and working women in the paid labour force. Some of the later stories, such as those by Munro, Harvor, and Thien, reflect the transition to third-wave feminism and its concerns about the sexualization of and control over women's bodies. Questioning stereotypes and long-held beliefs regarding sexual assault and gender violence, these stories bespeak a cultural shift in perceptions about women's societal roles and their attempts to perform power. I do not argue that women inherently embody or are a site of a spiritual or mystical "feminine power." As human beings all people, male, female, cisgender, transgender, intersexed, have the potential to exert agency. However, our families, communities, and societies that encompass and influence our worldviews stifle our abilities to perform acts of

power. As Butler notes, the “*social temporality*” (191) of the audience, those who act as witness to the gender performance, are mired in deep-seated cultural constructions of gender, particularly concerning power. In this dissertation, I demonstrate how female characters discover what power is available to them and how they decide to perform that power in social encounters via their bodies, their voices, and their intellects. Sometimes this power takes the form of agency, when the female characters act independently and frequently at odds with the social pressures of their surrounding community. Sometimes this power arises from the corporeal, when the female characters discover their sexual selves and abilities to create a sexual interest in others. Sometimes this power extends beyond the sexual, when the female characters speak about their distress or challenge social structures through the actions of their bodies. These twelve stories query how and why power is tendentious for women and provide examples via the female characters of the ways in which women locate, create, and perform power.

The bodies of the female characters in these stories sometimes demonstrate the painfully strict and cumbersome social construction of the ideal feminine body. However, many of the characters devise and use specific stratagems to bypass or circumvent the restriction of their bodies, bodies that are perceived to be outside societal norms by the male characters or by society at large. The women resist dominant Western ideals of femaleness and sexuality through varied means, such as embracing an embodied and lived sexuality, making alterations to the appearance of their bodies, or accepting their bodies as unstable and ever changing. These same modes of resistance can and sometimes do hinder the characters’ capacities to inhabit their bodies and perform a gender that is true to their senses of self. The fluidity of the body is both painful and exhilarating to the female characters as they seek bodies and gender performances that align with their life experiences of being both in and of the world.

### *Short Stories as Medium and Genre*

In his 1983 study *Kicking Against the Pricks*, John Metcalf discusses the supposed inferiority of the short story genre within the scholarly hierarchy: “Even in Canadian universities there seems to be a prejudice against stories. It’s true that they’re taught everywhere but graduate committees, so I’m told, shy away from theses on story writers—not enough *body* to stories apparently, unless they’re by the suitably dead and inept” (45). However, as Metcalf’s subsequent analysis indicates, short stories do have *body* in both a literal and metaphorical sense. The genre allows for fascinating scholarly critique specifically because of its form: the brevity of a short story allows for an emotional intensity and a focus on a particular aspect of a life or a character’s perspective on a limited range of events. In “The Canadian Short Story,” respected Canadian short-story writer Alistair MacLeod expresses the possibilities this genre offers to both the scholar and the reader: “To recognize the awesomeness of the great in the dazzling brilliance of the small requires that that which is small must first be perfectly rendered and understood. And then all things are possible” (166). The smallness of the text works in the scholar’s favour, but the story must first be “perfectly rendered and understood.” It is this magnifying of the small, this amplification of the story’s meaning, which is being sought through the current study’s narrative analysis.

In the Preface to *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand*, W. H. New delineates the genre of the short story as one suitable for cultures, like Canada, at the geographical, political, and cultural margins, and posits language as a reclaiming tool: “The challenge is to use the existing language, even if it is the voice of a dominant ‘other’ – and yet speak through it: to disrupt (or do ‘violence’ to) the codes and forms of the dominant language in order to reclaim speech for oneself” (x). While New is referencing

the “culturally powerful presence” (ix) of Britain and the United States, I extend this idea to Canadian women writers who use language in unexpected ways to reclaim the female body for women. This notion of Canadian women writers of the short story disrupting the “codes and forms” (x) of the genre is shared by Canadian writer Gail Scott, who argues in “Shaping a Vehicle for Her Use: Women and the Short Story” that the genre provides a place for Canadian women writers to break rules and “play with more feminine rhythms and concepts of time and space” (187). Scott notes the historical silencing of women and their stories, of being reduced by the dominant other to a “cultural cliché” (187), and points out the importance of women finding their voices and writing their desires: “The need is therefore to start naming our own real. To write ourselves” (186). The ten authors whose work I examine here are writing in order to “express what surges from inside” (Scott 185), to name women’s experiences of sexuality and embodiment via the medium of the short story.

Stories have long been sites of discursive power. American Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was one of the finest practitioners of the short story who conceived the short story as having a “single *effect* to be wrought” and argued that “unity of effect,” in which each part of the story works in unison to achieve a particular result, is indispensable (Rev. of *Twice Told*; “Poe on Short Fiction” 64). In “Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read,” Charles E. May states that “Poe shifted the reader’s narrative focus from mimetic events to aesthetic pattern” (15); the reader thus understands the crux of the story specifically because of the effects of the pattern laid out by the writer. In the introduction to *Reading/Writing Canada: Short Fiction and Nonfiction*, Judith Maclean Miller notes that the genre of the short story in written form was imagined and constructed in the nineteenth century by Poe, as well as by French writer Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) and Russian Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) (xii).

These early purveyors of the short story created fiction that was “carefully constructed, less wandering or diffuse than the older oral forms and intended for reading” (Miller xii). Like their predecessors of the oral tradition, these short stories were often “used to make a moral point or teach a lesson” (xii). An example of this early morality tale is Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), in which the narrator commits a murder, but is overwhelmed by guilt and ultimately confesses to his crime.

While Poe and others set the groundwork for defining the essential qualities of the genre, May’s 1976 collected essays titled *Short Story Theories* helped critical readers gain a more robust understanding of the short story genre and its beginnings as a “unique narrative form” (May xv).<sup>1</sup> In the second edition, *The New Short Story Theories* (1994), May argues that short stories, because of their abbreviated length, demand a “subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that derive from and establish the primacy of ‘an experience’ directly and emotionally created and encountered” (133). In order to further define the qualities of the short story, May contrasts the story to the novel and lists the overarching nature of the genre as “mythic and spiritual,” “intuitive and lyrical,” and existing to “defamiliarize’ the everyday” (133).

In “The Philosophy of the Short-Story,” Brander Matthews points to the brevity of a story as a feature element. For Matthews, less is often more: “[A]t its best it [the short story] impresses the reader with the belief that it would be spoiled if it were made larger, or if it were incorporated into a more elaborate work” (73). However, length is not the only defining characteristic of the genre. Austin Wright argues that the short story should be envisaged as having a “cluster of

---

<sup>1</sup> A subsequent moment of legitimization of the short story genre came in 1985 at the Midwest Modern Language Association conference when scholars of the short story came together for the first time (Lohafer and Clarey vii). The presentations that took place at that conference became the essays that comprise the genre theory collection edited by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989). This collection provides not only historical background for the genre, but also outlines how the short story is defined by theorists.

characteristics” (47), or specific “tendencies” (51), or even “conventions” (53). The term “conventions” can be problematic because it limits possibilities. Instead, it would be worthwhile to consider short stories as having *narrative dispositions* that are inclusive rather than exclusive. Wright suggests that the length should be a minimum of five hundred words and an absolute maximum length of Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” with characters and action fictional and straightforward, a quality of “intensity” (51), the use of both metaphor and symbolism, and the tendency to leave “significant things to inference” (52). Wright’s idea of imagining a “cluster of characteristics” (47) for the short story genre allows for greater flexibility in critical discourse because it emphasizes building connections as opposed to boundaries and boxes (48).

Suzanne C. Ferguson points out in “Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form,” that while “unity” is the defining factor for Poe and Matthews, other elements such as “techniques of plot compression” and “change or revelation of character” are the deciding factors in distinguishing a short story from other genres (218). Ferguson notes that writers such as Frank O’Connor use the “subject” as the discriminating factor of the genre, while Nadine Gordimer uses “tone” as the main feature and Alberto Moravia employs “lyricism” as the discerning aspect (218). She then challenges these categorizations, stating, “there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that . . . absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions” (218). Short stories are an ideal genre for my investigation into sexualized bodies because the genre, as Ferguson notes, is permeable and flexible, permitting a substantial amount of freedom for women writers to “play” (Scott 187) and explore in order to “defamiliarize’ the everyday” (May 133). The genre’s ability to defamiliarize women’s quotidian corporeal experiences is ideal in my investigation of femininity as a tool of power. The stories under review in this dissertation indeed focus directly and emotionally on a limited experience, creating moments that challenge



readers' world views and push them to question long-held beliefs about womanhood, femininity, and the body. As May argues, they present a space where the "safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead [is] disrupted and momentarily destroyed" (142). The episodic form of this genre creates a model environment to question certainties of gendered experience and to allow new possibilities to be explored.

In the Canadian context, a particularly accessible study is Michelle Gadpaille's *The Canadian Short Story* (1988). Gadpaille presents a historical survey of the genre in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada and includes three chapters on authors she considers Canada's "contemporary masters of the short story": Mavis Gallant, Munro, and Atwood (vii).<sup>2</sup> Gadpaille's chapter on Atwood emphasizes the difficulty of categorising Atwood's prose because her stories "skirt the edge of the short-story form without declaring absolute allegiance" (82). She argues that Atwood "continually tests the boundaries of the short story" (82), especially those of "plot, closure, diction, and voice" (98). Gadpaille details how Atwood frequently, and sometimes quite unexpectedly, changes perspective in her stories, which adds a richness to the "visionary experience" (83) of the protagonists. Gadpaille also explores Atwood's short story endings for their "almost mystical closure" (83), describing the "visionary endings" (90) as a means for bringing about a new understanding in both the protagonists and the readers. Just as Wright espouses the advantages of using a "cluster of characteristics" (47) to analyse the genre, Gadpaille relinquishes her desire to box the stories into concrete groupings, and instead embraces a variety of examples of the prose structure. In *Dreams of Speech and Violence*, New similarly questions whether or not conventional theories of the short story impose an unrealistic "set of

---

<sup>2</sup> The 1999 collection edited by Gerald Lynch and Angela Robbeson, *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*, explores the literary and cultural precursors to the modern-day Canadian short story.

expectations” (x) on the literary form and if these same expectations should be applied to work written by writers from the geographical and social margins.

In her introduction to *Reading/Writing Canada*, Miller argues that, like the short story worldwide, the genre within a Canadian context can be traced back to oral forms such as the “teaching tales, folktales, sagas, fables, anecdotes and trickster tales” (xi) that made up the original cultures within what is present-day Canada. While many of these stories were passed down through the generations verbally, there has been a resurgence in recent years through the process of translation and what Susan Gingell refers to as the “textualizing of orature” (4), in her description of oral work that has been performed and passed on verbally but then transcribed from a vocal performance to text (3-4). The anthology *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America* (1994), edited by Brian Swann, provides English translations and textualizations of traditional stories from more than two hundred First Nations in North America. An exemplar story from this anthology is “Mistacayawāsis, Big Belly Child,” which was told verbally in Cree by Angelique Linklater, translated into English by her husband, Henry Linklater, and recorded and transcribed by Robert Brightman. As with nineteenth-century short stories, the tale of Mistacayawāsis, Brightman notes, is akin to a “morality play . . . juxtaposing improper and correct conduct: murder and atonement, abandonment and rescue, the refusal and offer of food” (194). The listeners interpret the tale and construct meaning in a comparable way to a reader interpreting short fiction.

One of the earliest Canadian writers of short stories in serialized form was the Nova Scotian Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796-1865). The satiric sketches of the comedic American protagonist Sam Slick were collected together in one volume as *The Clockmaker* (1836). Haliburton’s short stories are considered distinctly Canadian, marking a separation from the

short story writing coming out of England and the United States. In *Canadian Literature*, Faye Hammill notes that *The Clockmaker* “achieved wide sales in both countries and became the first best-seller by a Canadian” (8). Haliburton’s stories are also the first examples of the Canadian short story cycle, what Gerald Lynch in *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* identifies as stories linked by “character, place, and style” (9). Non-conventional early short story cycles written by women were considered autobiographical and yet managed to embrace elements of fiction and melodrama. Works such as Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) and Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) are considered autobiographical “sketches” with an anecdotal focus on place and personal experiences (Lynch and Robbeson 4-5). In their introduction to *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*, Lynch and Angela Robbeson note that sketches are sometimes understood as “effusive romances, or amateurish” (4). Lynch and Robbeson defend the literary value of the sketch, describing examples of this genre as “fully realized” and as “accomplished and important in their historical-cultural contexts as any that came before or afterwards” (4). The sketch, with its fusion of genres, allows for a nuanced examination of a woman’s lived experience at that period in time.

Other pertinent examples of the short story cycle include civil servant and poet Duncan Campbell Scott’s *In the Village of Viger* (1896), humorist Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), German-born Frederick Philip Grove’s *Over Prairie Trails* (1922), Emily Carr’s autobiographical sketches of her interactions with the Indigenous peoples of British Columbia’s west coast in *Klee Wyck* (1941), Margaret Laurence’s semi-autobiographical *A Bird in the House* (1970), and Munro’s Governor General’s award-winning *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). These works illustrate what Lynch calls the long-established “Canadian

engagement with the question of individual and national identity in relation to place” (160). They also show that Canadian women writers as well as men have published and attained critical success in the genre of the short story cycle.

The rich history of Canadian women who write short stories gives credence to Northrop Frye’s belief in an “imaginative continuum” (250) through which the writer is influenced by past work in that writer’s chosen literary genre, whether or not she is aware of that work. For example, Traill and Moodie’s serialized sketches provided narratives with female protagonists to their mostly female readership. Allan Weiss notes in “Rediscovering the Popular Canadian Short Story” that women’s popular short stories were “published in general-interest magazines and designed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible” (87). Regardless of publication form or categorization as adolescent or romantic, these short stories remain important to our collective “imaginative continuum” (Frye 250).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, dozens of Canadian women were writing and publishing short stories, such as Isabella Valancy Crawford (1846-1887), Susan Frances Harrison (1859-1935), and Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922). As a teenager, Crawford had the good fortune of living in Lakefield, also the home of Traill, whom she greatly admired and who influenced her own writing career (Early and Peterman xii). Unlike Traill and Moodie before them, however, much of the writing by Crawford, Harrison, and Duncan published in popular magazines of the day was initially “deemed unworthy of serious study because of its mass market appeal and formulaic plots” (xiv). However, according to Wanda Campbell, these late nineteenth-century writers of women’s short fiction demonstrated in their work an “intense interest in language, identity, and the role of women, particularly in relation to marriage and motherhood” (18). Len Early and Michael Peterman discuss this issue in the introduction to their

collection of Crawford's short stories, noting that many of Crawford's stories adhere to the formula of romance fiction, encompassing "the contingencies and difficulties of a courtship that finally issues in an auspicious union of the heroine with her lover" (xvi). While the stories may be formulaic, they provide a window into contemporaneous gender stereotypes. Early and Peterman argue that Crawford's stories "dramatize a persistent anxiety about and inclination to question dominant nineteenth-century codes of gender" and "simultaneously affirm and destabilize conventional notions of frail and timid femininity through an insistence on the courage, initiative, and activity of their protagonists" (xxii). Although written in a melodramatic style, these romantic and moralistic tales still managed to challenge gender norms of the day.

Susan Frances Harrison, like her contemporary Crawford, published both prose and poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century. Harrison's best known, and arguably her most accomplished work stylistically, is her book of ten short stories and one novella titled *Crowded Out! And Other Sketches*. Carole Gerson notes that these stories demonstrate "a tonal balance of irony and sentimentality" (par. 5). Set in Europe and the Canadian Northwest, the stories describe in detail various phases of Canadian life. While Crawford and Harrison encouraged one another in their writing for serial publication, by the end of the nineteenth century their writing took on the current social causes of that period, and moved "beyond a focus on the domestic sphere towards an engagement with questions of social reform, women's education, and the extension of the franchise" (Early and Peterman xxvi). Women were questioning their roles in society, at a time when women's positions and roles in their family, community, and country were limited.

The melodramatic and often sentimental elements in stories published by Crawford and Harrison were rejected by Sara Jeannette Duncan (Campbell 23). In the Introduction to Duncan's

*The Pool in the Desert*, Rosemary Sullivan details Duncan's career as journalist and novelist, as well as her personal history of world travels and marriage in India. First published in 1903, *The Pool in the Desert* is a collection of four short stories set in India. One of these stories, "A Mother in India," critiques women's conventional roles: "It is a witty, subtle, and extremely intelligent study of a woman who discovers that her notions of her own independent being are in conflict with her maternal role, which in her case has no roots in a history of feeling, but is rather a masquerade imposed by social demands" (Sullivan 15). A century or more later, the focus on the tensions of motherhood and familial life, but also social reform and gender roles and stereotypes, is still evident in Canadian women's short fiction.

The last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century saw an explosion in publication of romantic short stories by Canadian women in magazines within Canada and abroad. Lynch outlines the significant contributions these short works made to the Canadian literary scene at the time:

The short stories in these magazines, pioneering a somewhat alternate Canadian literary culture, were written predominantly by women who thrived on the margins of patriarchal society. Their stories are not 'merely' sketches, or effusive romances, or amateurish (and therefore dismissable) in any sense. They are fully realized short stories as accomplished and important in their historical-cultural contexts as any that came before or afterwards. (4)

While on the margins of society, as Lynch notes, these women accomplished skilled prose, writing, as Campbell remarks, "vitality of the fibre of human relationships" (24). In "The Canadian Short Story," Alistair MacLeod also explains that early twentieth-century women wrote compelling stories without the necessary time to pen those stories: "[T]o create literature

one has to have ‘language and leisure’ and for many years there were not many people in this country who had both” (161). Female writers were also still often categorized as writers not only of romance but also for adolescents. According to Jean Stringam, adolescent literature began in earnest in Canada in 1876, with many American periodicals for young adult readers publishing Canadian short stories (53). Many of the Canadian contributors are today recognized for their adult literature such as Duncan, Nellie McClung (1873-1951), and Lucy Maud Montgomery (1874-1942).

With the rise of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, short story writers began to reject the notion that a story had to have a moral message (Miller xii). An early example, Duncan’s “The Heir Apparent,” published in a monthly magazine in 1905, describes the conversation between three women in Toronto: “Gone are the improbable plots, the extravagant and melodramatic details, and the larger-than-life characters” (Campbell 23). Instead there is a deft prose style that focuses on the theme of imperialism and the Canadian experience. Indeed, modernist writers experimented with revisions to traditional patterns or forms and were concerned with “character, people’s actions and [in their] ways of expression” (Miller xii). This experimentation with modernism is evident in short stories by Canadian women during that time period. While modernist writing has been understood as a predominantly male endeavour, Marianne DeKoven argues that modernism, “through its complex deployments of gender reveals not only the centrality of femininity, but also, again, an irresolvable ambivalence toward radical cultural change at the heart of modernist formal innovation in the works of both male and female writers” (175). DeKoven believes that the “reactive misogyny” (176) in male-authored modernist texts has wrongly produced a sense that modernism was essentially a “masculinist movement” (176). As noted earlier, Canadian women writers were also publishing popular short fiction in

general interest magazines during this period. While earlier scholars sometimes considered this work “disposable” because it was published in magazines and newspapers, it was powerful in that it originated from women’s experiences of the First World War, the Depression, and the Second World War (Weiss 88, 93), as well as first-wave feminism and the women’s suffrage movement in Canada.

In the Preface to *The Canadian Short Story*, Gadpaille notes a surge of women writing short fiction in Canada in the latter half of the century. She argues that “The dominance of women writers certainly reflects the story’s recent tendency to turn inward, towards the body, the emotions, and ultimately the mind—territories that have not received sustained or primary attention by male writers in Canada” (viii). In Gadpaille’s estimation, male Canadian short story writers—Alistair MacLeod, John Metcalf, and Guy Vanderhaeghe to name a few—pen stories that can “stand up” to women’s stories, but their collections as a whole are not as completely satisfying as those of Canadian women writers of the short story like Gallant, Munro, and Atwood (vii). While I do not share Gadpaille’s assessment of short story collections by male Canadian writers—MacLeod’s *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and Vanderhaeghe’s *Things As They Are?* (1992) are robust collections that explore such themes as masculinity and place—I do agree that women writers’ collections of stories are some of the strongest within the Canadian canon. While past generations were limited to penning short melodramatic serialized fiction for periodicals, members of this generation of women writers have greater and more varied artistic and publishing opportunities. Their stories, Gadpaille believes, “affirm story-making as a force for explorations, understanding, and healing” (viii). One example is the exploration of the “mother/daughter relationship” in women’s short stories, which Robert Thacker examines in his essay about Alice Munro’s stories, “Mapping Munro: Reading the ‘Clues’” (130). Whereas



concerns of marriage and motherhood consistently appear throughout the twentieth century, certain subjects such as female sexuality, the influence of beauty culture, and concerns about bodily integrity do not emerge until the second half of the twentieth century.

In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Canadian Women's Short Stories*, Lisa Moore describes the short story as embodying everything that a novel does, but in a form that it is “undiluted” (x) and packs a “walloping punch” (x). In the chapters of this dissertation, Canadian women writers are shown to create stories that destabilize readers’ understanding of the commonplace, turning the quotidian into a site of extraordinary insights for the protagonists, in an “undiluted” format that implores the reader to take notice. The stories under review exhibit many common threads: the oftentimes fractious relationship between mothers and daughters in the transition years from girlhood to adult womanhood and the associated changes in the performance of femininity; the connections between body, sexuality and femininity; and the exploration of women’s identities after life-altering events. These stories examine individual identity in relation to the embodied self, what Carla Rice describes as “how selves are expressed/materialized through bodies and how meanings given to bodies inevitably shape selves” (17). The ten Canadian women writers featured in this study, some of whom are better known for writing novels but all of whom have produced powerful short story collections, use the medium of the short story as a deft instrument to query performances of femininity as a strategy for empowerment.

### **Alice Munro (1931-)**

Born and raised in Wingham, Ontario, and educated at the University of Western Ontario, Munro is regarded as a preeminent short story writer in English. She has published fourteen short

story collections, three of which won the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction.<sup>3</sup> She has also won a number of other awards and prizes, most notably in 2013 when she became the first Canadian to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Munro has never published a novel, although many of her story cycles have been analyzed as such. Her stories have been published in such journals as *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* and have been extensively anthologized. Many of the stories, particularly in the collections *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), represent what Amelia DeFalco calls "feminist explorations of identity that provocatively explore the politics of gender and art" (378).

### **Marian Engel (1933-1985)**

Born in Toronto, Engel studied at McGill and McMaster Universities.<sup>4</sup> She was the first chairperson of the Writer's Union of Canada in 1973 and remained passionate about writer's causes, particularly publishing contracts (Garay). Engel is perhaps best known for her 1976 novel *Bear*, which won the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction. As Christl Verduyn argues, Engel's portrayals of human beings in her novels and short stories illustrate "[t]he tension between living within the parameters of a male oriented reality and living in a freer world of female imagination"; her female protagonists are described as "feisty" and "explosive individuals" (13). The Marian Engel Award, administered between 1986 and 2007 by the Writer's Trust of Canada, honoured mid-career Canadian women writers deemed to have a "remarkable body of work and in anticipation of future contributions to Canadian literature" (Writer's Trust).<sup>5</sup> Many of the writers included in this dissertation have won that award.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), and *The Progress of Love* (1986).

<sup>4</sup> McMaster holds the Marian Engel Archive.

<sup>5</sup> In 2008, the Engel and Timothy Findley literary awards were merged to form the Writer's Trust Engel/Findley Award which continues to this day.

<sup>6</sup> Awarded winners include Alice Munro (1986), Carol Shields (1990), Bonnie Burnard (1995), Barbara Gowdy (1996), and Elisabeth Harvor (2003).

### **Carol Shields (1935-2003)**

The author of short stories, novels, plays, poetry, biography, and criticism and the editor of anthologies, Shields is perhaps best known for her novel *The Stone Diaries* (1993), which won both the Governor General's award for fiction (1993) and the Pulitzer Prize (1995). She was born in suburban Chicago, Illinois, became a Canadian citizen in 1971, and completed an MA at the University of Ottawa in 1973. Having previously published poetry, Shields's first collection of short fiction, *Small Ceremonies* (1976), was published when she was forty-one years old.

Scholars such as Lorraine York point to the characteristics of Shields's literature as spotlighting "domesticity, family, [and] the quotidian" (242). While the focus of her work may indeed be on "ordinary life" (York 238), Shields's writing manages to disrupt "traditional" structures, such as mystery or romance genres, by adding "dimensions of sophisticated intellectual analysis to the traditional focus" (Hammill 61). When asked if her fiction is an expression of her feminism, Shields stated, "I think, inevitably, it is. . . . I feel being a feminist is part of me. And I'll always express myself as a feminist, simply because—it's the only language I know" (Interview with Kruk 201).

### **Elisabeth Harvor (1936-)**

A novelist, poet, essayist, and writer of short stories, Harvor was born in 1936 in Saint John, New Brunswick. Harvor spent a substantial amount of time in Copenhagen, where she was free to read "novel after novel," calling it "the best possible education for a writer" ("On Becoming a Writer"). In a review of her book *Let Me Be the One*, Judith Timson describes Harvor as a "brave writer. She isn't afraid to invest the considerable power of her language on very small moments in a woman's life" (82). In conversation with Laurie Kruk, Harvor agreed that the mother figure is important in her writing: "My female protagonists may actually be more

mother-haunted than most women in Canadian fiction” (147). Harvor has published three collections of short stories, three collections of poetry, and two novels, and her poetry and fiction has been included in numerous periodicals and anthologies.

### **Margaret Atwood (1939-)**

Creator of short stories, novels, poetry, children’s books, literary criticism, political essays, and edited anthologies, as well as sound recordings and television, theatre, and radio scripts, Atwood is arguably the most prolific and well-known Canadian writer both domestically and internationally. Educated at the University of Toronto, Radcliffe College, and Harvard University, Atwood has won numerous awards and honorary degrees, including Governor General’s Awards in 1965 and 1985 and the Booker Prize in 2000. Her writing is often focused on feminist issues, with “strong, often enigmatic, women characters” (*British Council*). Atwood’s fascination with the female body is evident in her women protagonists who, Madeleine Davies argues, “show marked signs of bodily unease. . . . Atwood’s fictional female bodies become battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh” (58). Her work has found world-wide readership, having been published in more than thirty languages. Atwood has published many short story collections, two of which are examined in this dissertation: *Bluebeard’s Egg* (1983) and *Wilderness Tips* (1991).

### **Bonnie Burnard (1945-)**

Burnard was born in Ontario, although she has spent much of her life in Saskatchewan. Her short story collection *Casino and Other Stories* (1995) was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and won the Saskatchewan Best Book of the Year Award. She has also published the short story collection *Women of Influence* (1988) and two novels: *A Good House* (1999 Giller Prize) and *Suddenly* (2009). Carol Shields favourably reviewed *A Good House*, declaring that Burnard

“honours her characters, men as well as women with a gender sensitivity we don’t often see in our novels” (C12). In the contributors section of the anthology *Dropped Threads*, Burnard herself states that she wants her writing not only to bring enjoyment but also to make a cultural and social contribution (350).

### **Barbara Gowdy (1950-)**

Gowdy was born in Windsor, Ontario, and grew up in the suburbs of Toronto. She was educated both at York University and the Royal Conservatory of Music. Both a novelist and writer of short stories, Gowdy has had seven works of literature published to date, and has been nominated or shortlisted for numerous literary awards, winning the Marian Engel award in 1996 and the Trillium book award in 2007. Many of Gowdy’s works have been adapted for the movie screen, including *Falling Angels* and the title story from the collection *We So Seldom Look On Love*, which became the movie *Kissed*. In an article discussing Gowdy’s *We So Seldom Look On Love*, Hilde Zitzelsberger notes that the author explores the “ambiguous status of anomalous bodies” and the “lives of those beyond and on the margins of normality” (11).

### **Linda Svendsen (1954-)**

Svendsen, who is from Vancouver, has had short stories published in literary magazines and anthologies, although her main focus since the late 1980s has been writing for television. Svendsen co-produced and co-wrote the CBC mini-series *Human Cargo*, which won several Gemini awards. She also wrote the screenplay for Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, which went on to win the Gemini for Best TV Movie in 1994. Svendsen’s collection *Marine Life* (1992) consists of eight linked stories about a Vancouver family. Loosely autobiographical, these stories are narrated by Adele Nordstrom who “chronicles a cycle of emotional neediness and despair” (Steinberg 38). In 2000, *Marine Life* was adapted as a film starring Cybill Shepherd.

### **Eden Robinson (1968-)**

Born in Kitamaat Village on the central coastline of British Columbia, Robinson is a member of the Haisla First Nation. She attended the University of Victoria and the University of British Columbia. Her first collection of short stories, *Traplines* (1996), won Britain's Winifred Holtby Prize for the best regional work by a Commonwealth writer, while her novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. In an interview for the CBC, Rachel Giese describes Robinson's writing as "Poe on smack: dark, disturbing and frequently bloody" (par. 1). Her writing often makes reference to the removal of Aboriginal children, their placement in Residential schools, and the devastating results felt throughout multiple generations of "lost or alienated motherhood" (Kulperger 233). In remembering the "traumatized maternal subjects" in her writing, Robinson complicates the mother figure (Kulperger 240). In a review of Robinson's episodic narrative *The Sasquatch at Home: Traditional Protocols and Modern Storytelling* (2011), Nancy Van Styvendale notes that the writing evokes "oral traditions," as readers "are called to draw the connections and come to our own conclusions" (147).

### **Madeleine Thien (1974-)**

Thien was born in Vancouver to parents of Chinese and Malaysian heritage. Her writing became an outlet for her loneliness; as she states in an interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen for *In-Sight*, "I lived in my head. Writing became a way to express things that were unsayable." Thien went on to study contemporary dance at Simon Fraser University followed by creative writing at the University of British Columbia. *Simple Recipes*—the short story collection that includes "Alchemy"—was derived from her MFA manuscript and went on to win the Asian Canadian Writer's Workshop's Emerging Writer Award in 1998 as well as several other prizes.<sup>7</sup> According to Hiromi Goto, this collection is situated within the "fraught spaces between the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Five for a complete list of prizes and awards Thien received for *Simple Recipes*.

individual and family, [and] the ‘domestic space’ is revisited as a site of intense longing, unfulfilled moments and quiet tragedy” (34). Jeannie Chiu notes that each story describes stressed familial relationships, and that the collection as a whole chronicles “a sense of alienation from home that resonates with experiences of immigration, exile, and minority status” (115). Since the publication of *Simple Recipes*, Thien has had three novels published: *Chinese Violin* (2002), *Certainty* (2006), and *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011).

### *Theorizing the Female Body*

Feminist theoretical conceptions of gender and the human body are intrinsic to a discussion of women’s performance of femininity as an act of power. The foundations of feminist theoretical concepts of the body and gender performance originate in the work of several twentieth-century French feminists. With the publication in 1952 of the English translation *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) became one of the first second-wave feminist to write about women’s marginalized place within patriarchy. She writes in the introduction to her book that “the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (xxvi), and that woman resides in a world where “men compel her to assume the status of Other” (xxxv). Incensed by the inequality of patriarchal culture, Beauvoir asks: “How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? . . . What circumstances limit woman’s liberty and how can they be overcome?” (xxxv). These questions regarding the pathways and possible roadblocks that women encounter *en route* to accomplishment, achievements, and freedom, continue to shape feminist theory and women’s literature. De Beauvoir famously states that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (267). De Beauvoir’s perspectives are still relevant, especially to my discussions of the moments of

becoming woman of fictional female characters as they experience societal gendered differences and the Othering of their bodies.

By the 1970s, French literary theorists and proponents of *écriture féminine* Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva began publishing influential theoretical works that pinpointed sex and gender as social constructions. *Écriture féminine* catapulted issues of language, sex, and the feminine into the forefront of the analysis of women's writing, laying the foundation for further theorizing and philosophizing on the interplay between the body and writing. Irigaray credits de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as inspirational (Hansen 202), and builds on de Beauvoir's investigation of woman as Other to man in Western society and culture (Jones 29). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray posits that "women's 'liberation' requires transforming the economic realm, and thus necessarily transforming culture and its operative agency, language" (211). The liberation of women will occur when the transformation of language is undertaken, thus opening up "a space within patriarchy through writing to enable the representation of sexual difference outside of it" (Hansen 203). As my research examines verbal discourse (writing) about non-verbal discourses (actions of the body), I draw from Irigaray's concept that language is based in the masculine, and that women must therefore seek alternative ways of speaking and expressing themselves. I argue that this expression occurs most articulately in Canada through bodily descriptions and ruminations within what New calls the "marginal" genre of short fiction.

Cixous, a French feminist playwright, novelist, and literary philosopher, coined the term *écriture féminine* as a way of expressing women's experiences in writing in order to oppose the phallogentric literary tradition that Cixous finds "self-admiring, self-stimulating, [and] self-congratulatory" ("The Laugh" 261). In the work of Cixous, particularly the essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), she encourages women to "put herself into the text" (257). Cixous's essay



functions as a symbolic call for women to arm themselves with pen and paper in order to express their bodies and themselves: “Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it” (259). According to Abigail Bray, Cixous posits that *écriture féminine* is in fact “capable of transforming previous definitions of the female body and opening up new horizons for rewriting the body” (36). The ten female authors under analysis in this study engage in Cixous’s challenge by writing fiction that explores the varied discourses of the female body such as distress, pleasure, and shame.

In *Women’s Time* (1981), Kristeva questions the possible reasons women have been drawn to the writing of literature. Kristeva asks, “Is it because when literature is in conflict with social norms, it diffuses knowledge and occasionally the truth about a repressed, secret, and unconscious universe? Is it because literature intensifies the social contract by exposing the uncanny nature of that which remains unsaid?” (196). These questions posit women’s writing as a gateway of sorts, into a realm that has remained in the shadows. Kristeva follows this line of questioning by concluding that at the heart of women’s writing is a “desire to lift the sacrificial weight of the social contract and to furnish our societies with a freer and more flexible discourse that is able to give a name to that which has not yet been an object of widespread circulation: the mysteries of the body, secret joys, shames, hate displayed toward the second sex” (196).

Kristeva’s words are not only a nod to de Beauvoir but also demonstrate an astute awareness of how through the act of writing, women open up a discourse on topics that have been considered taboo such as the abject female body. For Kristeva, abjection is the “state of abjecting or rejecting what is other to oneself” (McAfee 3). The abject is the impure, such as dung, vomit, a corpse, and as Noëlle McAfee argues is thus both an “unconscious and conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self” (46). Women’s writing for Kristeva is a vehicle to explore the

“unsaid” (Kristeva 196), the seeming abject body of the female, which includes the maternal and the sexual.

As well as concepts of the Other and *écriture féminine*, the contextual basis of my analysis includes theories of gender and the body put forth by respected North American feminist philosophers, historians, and psychoanalysts such as Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Elizabeth Grosz, Susie Orbach, Iris Marion Young, and Marilyn Yalom. Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) builds on the work of *l’écriture féminine*, as Butler argues that gender is a cultural construction (8). Butler characterizes gender identity as a “personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction” (188). Butler denies the notion of gender as natural or something one is born into or with. Instead, she argues that gender is a learned thing, imitated by others within our communities, mimicked and constructed to the point that we experience the false impression of a natural “gendered self” (188). Butler believes that gender is both “intentional and performative” (190). In the narratives under consideration, gender is “dramatic and contingent” (190) within the performances of power that the women characters either enact or struggle with. As Butler states, “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual” (xv). Each chapter of this dissertation explores the repetitive and ritualistic nature of learning, or of having learned, the bodily performances of femininity.

Also relevant for this study is Bordo’s work concerning gender and consumer culture, which explores the values and practices that Western society draws on in normalizing body discipline for women and the repercussions that this discipline has on women’s bodies and lives. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), Bordo focuses on the

“complexly and densely institutionalized *system* of values and practices within which girls and women . . . come to believe that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (32). Within Western culture, women’s worth is systematically defined by others and then, using outside criteria, by themselves based on their outer appearance and its ability to achieve a slim aesthetic. As Bordo writes, in order to measure up to societal prescripts of the female form, women spend an exorbitant amount of time and energy in the practice of body perfectibility: “Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification” (166). This normalizing of time spent on self-modification is evident in the short stories under review, in which certain protagonists allow body work to consume their lives. The normalizing of body discipline and modification is explored further in Bordo’s claim of anorexia as protest against the “limitations of the ideal of female domesticity” (159), a resistance strategy explored by other feminist scholars and philosophers and also examined in several short stories.

My analysis of fictional representations of the lived female body, the body as a meaningful marker of lived feminine experience, is aided by Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), a detailed examination and renegotiation of body theories. Grosz analyzes concepts about the “lived body” (18) by feminist scholars such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Butler, who argue that the “body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange” (18). This conception of the body as both reactive to and participant in the making of meaning is explored further by Grosz in relation to

sexual binaries. She writes that “[w]omen’s bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men’s but also . . . position them in a relation of passive dependence and secondariness to men’s” (202). Grosz believes that because of this position of inferiority, women’s sexuality is constrained, given that “the only socially recognized and validated representations of women’s sexuality are those which conform to and accord with the expectations and desires of a certain heterosexual structuring of male desire” (202). While women are limited in the ways in which they can experience their sexuality, there “remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions” (204). The notion of a particular legitimate or valid sexuality, in combination with narrow constructions of the female body as inferior and unstable, creates a problematic position for the female body and its performance of sexuality.

In *Bodies* (2009), Orbach details reasons for women’s bodily concerns and actions, as well as deep-rooted societal concerns around the achievement of “body beautiful” (3), which Orbach describes as a slim aesthetic with large breasts (3). Orbach specifies the growing emphasis on beauty and possession of the “right body” as a form of belonging within Western culture (3). Attempts to achieve this increasingly homogenised and narrow aesthetic can lead to hatred of one’s body, what Orbach calls “bodily instability and body shame” (8). Other sources than media constructions and images are at play in espousing the perfectible body. For Orbach, the primary way in which what she calls “body dis-ease” (15) is acquired is via familial influences. Orbach writes that “we have entered a new epoch of body destabilisation, and . . . there is a new franticness surrounding the body induced by social forces which are absorbed and transmitted in the family, where we first acquire our bodily sense” (9). This is what Orbach

refers to as the “transgenerational transmission of anxious embodiment” (74), particularly from mother to daughter.

In “Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling” (2005), Young emphasizes the importance of breasts to a woman’s sense of femininity and sexuality because they represent a “daily visible and tangible signifier of her womanliness” (76).<sup>8</sup> Young also details the ways in which Western hegemonic culture fetishizes breasts, with the “best” breasts replicating the phallus: “high, hard, and pointy” (77). This cultural construction of breasts posits only one “perfect shape and proportion” (79) in which breasts are “round, sitting high on the chest, large but not bulbous, with the look of firmness” (79). Just as Orbach notes the difficulty of achieving a “body beautiful” (*Bodies* 3), Young notes that very few women’s breasts ever approximate such restricted conditions and standards (79). Young’s discussions of breast objectification and breasts as cultural constructions can be applied to discussions of traumatic breast loss, and support the notion that a “natural body is a fiction” (Orbach, *Bodies* 8).

In *A History of the Breast* (1997), historian Yalom writes about the cultural history of the breast since prehistoric times. Like Young, Yalom identifies breasts as cultural constructions as well as physical parts of one’s body, noting the “influence of the media in spreading a normative picture of what a desirable female is supposed to look like” (7). As she argues, “it is difficult to feel good about one’s breasts if they do not correspond to the body ideal of one’s time and place” (7). Yalom also touches on the possible pitfalls or dangers of body work and the resulting hopes for a “body beautiful” (Orbach, *Bodies* 3). She writes, “Those hemispheric orbs on boylike bodies represent an impossible ideal for almost all women. Confronted by such images, many women consider breast-augmentation surgery or succumb to bouts of bulimia, anorexia, and

---

<sup>8</sup> This chapter was originally published in 1992 as “Breasted Experience” in *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice* edited by Drew Leder.

other forms of self-hatred” (277). This scenario is indeed what occurs in some of the short stories under review. The fictional female characters take up various body projects as either strategy for inclusion in or protest against the limiting ideals.

The corporeal theories proposed by these and other scholars help to identify and critique the narrow space women find themselves in. The often suffocating designation of “proper” feminine performance emulates the short story genre, in which writers navigate through and play in a genre that is physically small. Just as short stories, despite their brevity, can have discursive power, the stories under review show gender to be “intentional and performative” (Butler 190). The female characters negotiate Western ideals of female beauty and femininity through a spectrum of compliance and defiance, creating space, however small, for a performance of femininity that can be interpreted as an act of taking power.

Chapter 1, “‘I Tie It Up with a Bright Red Ribbon’: The Gift of Transgressive Corporeality in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Hairball’ and Eden Robinson’s ‘Queen of the North,’” examines the bodies of the female characters as signifiers of transgressive corporeality: the women’s bodies are considered “grotesque” because of their corporeal instability (Shapira 52). Particular parts of the protagonists’ misfit reproductive bodies—a benign tumour and a post-abortion menstrual blood clot—are the signifiers and symbols of rebellion. However, when interpreted through the masculine gaze, the transgressive bodies and actions are perceived in a way opposite to what the women characters have hoped they will be.

In Chapter 2, “‘Nipples are no-nos’: The Mastectomized Body in Bonnie Burnard’s ‘Nipple Man,’ Carol Shields’s ‘Eros,’ and Linda Svendsen’s ‘White Shoulders,’” the focus remains on the misfit body, but more specifically on breasts that diverge from societal ideals. In these stories, the trauma of cancer of the breast is played out through familial, societal, and

personal responses to breast loss. The need put forward in these stories for the post-surgical body to be indistinguishable from the pre-surgical body—impossible yet attempted via implants and/or speciality bras—indicates the concomitant pressures placed on the female body by both the self and society.

In Chapter 3, “‘I Only Throw Up Dinners’: The Anorectic and Bulimic Stance as Parody in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Spring Song of the Frogs’ and Madeleine Thien’s ‘Alchemy,’” eating distress and disordered eating are explored using theories proposed by Bordo, Grosz, and Orbach. These stories demonstrate that anorectic and bulimic stances both align the female body with a “body beautiful” ideal (Orbach, *Bodies* 3), and take that ideal to an extreme. The female characters are not docile victims of the socially constructed norms of feminine appearance. Instead, these short stories pinpoint the possibilities and boundaries of resistance, with female characters who try to inhabit the sphere of socially acceptable and sanctioned femininity, all the while exploiting some elements of the social construction of the ideal for personal pleasure and as resistance against control.

In Chapter 4, “Performing Female Heterosexuality: The Teenage Body in Elisabeth Harvor’s ‘One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine,’ Bonnie Burnard’s ‘Crush,’ and Alice Munro’s ‘Wenlock Edge,’” I explore fictionalized teenage bodies and the ways in which young women characters learn to perform a particular kind of femininity through their bodies. The protagonists in these stories are learning the fluidity of their bodies and how to express their sexuality to suit their needs. The young women comprehend by each narrative’s end what comprises socially accepted “body beautiful” (Orbach, *Bodies* 3), but they also figure the hetero-male gaze into this equation. Without a masculine audience—leering, teasing, and staring at the three protagonists’ bodies in various states of undress—would the characters

perform their femininity and sexuality differently? The masculine gaze is present in these stories (and several of the others under scrutiny) because of its importance in the commodification of the female form for the pleasure of the hetero-male.

Chapter 5, “‘My Body is My Canvas’: Transforming and Performing the Female Body in Marian Engel’s ‘The Tattooed Woman’ and Barbara Gowdy’s ‘Ninety-three Million Miles Away’,” examines the use of the body as a canvas. In Engel and Gowdy’s short stories the protagonists cut or paint their faces and bodies as a way of performing power, while at the same time ironically performing these and other acts of self-pleasure for a specific masculine gaze. These characters are thus resolute in altering their bodies in order to better align their exteriors with specific groups of women that they idealize as powerful.

### *Bridging Genre and Bodies*

While I examine short stories that explore the sexualized body as a whole, the central focus of my study remains on imagery and the linguistic features used to describe specific body parts such as misshapen, mismatched, and mastectomised breasts, and numerous other iterations of transgressive female corporeality. I argue that the female body’s ability to speak discourses of determined acquiescence to, as well as both painful and joyous resistance against patriarchal hegemony, is contingent on the characters’ sex, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, marital status, culture, and age. I hypothesize that these stories demonstrate that female characters frequently develop or exhibit the agency to transcend hegemonic norms of beauty ideals, performing power via body projects, but that social constructions of female bodies are sometimes too influential to circumvent.

Characters in the short stories under study exemplify many elements of corporeal experience, and these discourses of the body not only explore but also help to revise existing



feminist body theories. These stories show that women's bodies are socially constructed and that social constructions of the female body are used in attempts to control women's lives. Power and resources are pivotal in determining how, if, and why female characters police their behaviour in order to navigate the treacherous waters of female social norms. On one end of this spectrum are female characters who are socialized to control their bodies in order to live an acceptable corporeality based on cultural norms. Further along the spectrum are female characters who engage in body modification and in so doing develop greater agency and pleasure through their body work. However, competing meanings of their resulting body canvases exhibit the problematic use and limits of corporeal resistance. While reclaiming strategies such as self-cutting and self-starvation may promote greater empowerment in many of the female characters in these short stories, it would be simplistic to argue that their bodies' messages are read as the female characters intended by their audiences, primarily male characters. These limits are particularly evident in the short stories in which the reader is privy to the thoughts of the male characters, via first-person narration and third-person omniscient narration, demonstrating incomprehension and even inaccurate understanding of the female body projects. Consequently the close readings and analysis of body projects that celebrate a shift to greater female agency by narrative's end must be tempered with skepticism in regards to body projects and their limitations.

In "English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities," Donna Bennett closes her discussion of Canadian literature by cautioning critical readers not to limit critiques of literature to one specific theoretical perspective. Bennett states that Canada is a "collection of cultures" (127) and further counsels the reader to appreciate English Canadian literature as "not so much a mosaic as a kaleidoscope, an arrangement of fragments whose interrelationships, while ever changing,

nevertheless serve—by virtue of their container, we might say—not only to influence what we see when we look through the glass, but also to affect the placement of the other elements in the array” (127). The image of literary theory as kaleidoscope through which we interpret multifarious realities lends itself to the scholarship and texts under analysis in this dissertation. Looking through the lens of the kaleidoscope, the Canadian short stories are reflected and refracted as the mirrors create new patterns. In rotating the kaleidoscope and examining the texts from a variety of perspectives, new shapes, forms, and models come into focus. The kaleidoscope creates new meaning and significance in relation to these stories by infusing the object cell (the part of the kaleidoscope where objects move) with scholarship and theoretical frameworks about the body proposed by feminists, philosophers, literary theorists, psychologists, artists, and clinicians. The resulting patterns offer models of performing power that play within and outside Western norms of the cisgendered female body.

## Chapter 1

### “I Tie It Up with a Bright Red Ribbon”: The Gift of Transgressive Corporeality in Margaret Atwood’s “Hairball” and Eden Robinson’s “Queen of the North”

In both Margaret Atwood’s “Hairball” and Eden Robinson’s “Queen of the North,” the protagonist prepares a gift of her macabre “pseudo-baby” for an absent male character. Whether it be tied in a “mauve bow” (Atwood, “Hairball” 58) or a “red ribbon” (Robinson 213), the gift exemplifies what Yael Shapira, expanding on Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, calls the “grotesque.” Bakhtin argues that “grotesque realism” is a carnivalesque degradation of the pure and noble in the material body (317). However, because Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque does not consider gender, Shapira infuses her concept with Julia Kristeva’s work on the abject and abjection (53). The grotesque female body—“leaky,” unruly, and “abject”—symbolizes the “transgressive woman” (52-53). Her “biological flux” represents the disorder that is used to justify her “containment or punishment” (52). While Shapira details the established narrative formula of linking the grotesque female body with the transgressive woman, Debra Gimlin discusses in *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture*, the troubling notion that the “imperfect body has become a sign of an imperfect character” (5). Western culture dictates the importance of body work for women in order to contain or fix that which transgresses.

However, the bodies in these stories, imperfect and unruly, challenge this notion of “imperfect character.” Published six years apart,<sup>9</sup> the short stories share similarly shocking *dénouements* in which the protagonists gift productions of their unruly bodies to their

---

<sup>9</sup> Atwood’s “Hairball” was originally published under the title “Kat” in *The New Yorker* in 1990 and a year later as “Hairball” in the collection *Wilderness Tips: Stories*. Robinson’s “Queen of the North” was a last-minute addition to *Traplines* in 1996, replacing the science fiction short story “Terminal Avenue” that publishers found “anomalous” (Hoy 225).

lovers/molesters. Atwood, the *grande dame* of Canadian literature, and Robinson, the “Generation X laureate” (Marcus 21), use parallel images in order to explicate dissimilar circumstances—one of jilted love, the other abusive incest—while each explores female corporeality in multiple forms of transgressiveness, and considers whether or not such transgressions empower. These stories pose intriguing questions concerning the body and power. How are negative metaphors of illness cast off through failed or terminated reproduction? Must the unruly body signify the unruly woman and for what purpose? Is gallows humour, noted for being grim and ironical and for treating serious matters in a satirical fashion (*OED*), a form of resistance? This chapter will work to answer these questions by focusing on the corporeal transgressions by Atwood’s Kat from “Hairball” and Robinson’s Adelaine from “Queen of the North”—restricting and constricting the body, abusing the body through physical aggression and substance abuse, and presenting the gift of a pseudo-baby—and will consider the ways in which such transgressions enable the protagonists to perform power in light of the stories’ ambiguous conclusions. Utilizing the potential grotesqueness from within the female body, what theorist Elizabeth Grosz describes as its “(hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities” (14), Kat’s and Adelaine’s gifts challenge gendered power relations, the consequences of which lead to implied humiliation, grief, and possible death, but also demonstrate the potential for greater agency and power.

Until their endings, these short stories explore women experiencing disparate life struggles, with “Hairball” focused on Kat’s professional, personal, and physical journey—with Kat as what Shapira describes as “the controversial Eighties icon of the female professional, ruthlessly ambitious and sexually aggressive” (60)—and “Queen of the North” focused on a teenaged woman seeking an end to the ongoing sexual abuse perpetrated by her uncle. While

Atwood uses the protagonist's body to demonstrate the ultimate impossibility and futility of total corporeal control by oneself, Robinson formulates a protagonist whose attempts to anesthetise her body and mind prove hopeless. Still, with endings so eerily similar, these stories merit a critical comparison.

In her book on Canadian fiction of the apocalypse, Marlene Goldman devotes an entire chapter to Atwood's "Hairball," exploring various Aboriginal Wendigo tales and their significance as apocalyptic disaster narratives influencing the "ruthless, future-oriented apocalyptic thinking" (84) of the protagonist, Kat. While Goldman makes some pertinent remarks regarding the theme of consumption, Shapira's article "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque" is more influential to my own arguments, as it details the narrative history of linking the "grotesque" female body to the transgressing woman, through which the unstable body is presented as a physical manifestation of the unstable woman.<sup>10</sup> Shapira questions how to read such body "disorder," and explores whether or not current narratives celebrate or continue to silence the transgressive woman (53).

Unlike the few essays published on "Hairball," the critical writing on Robinson's "Queen of the North" is wide-ranging. Whether a self-reflective piece on the possible pitfalls of reading *Traplines* for its "Nateness" and the equally problematic dismissal of Aboriginal provenance (a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't argument) that Helen Hoy employs in her book chapter "'How Should I Eat These?' Eden Robinson's *Traplines*,"<sup>11</sup> or the historical importance of naming as creative tool within Aboriginal cultures to both acknowledge and subvert, which Nancy Van Styvendale explores in "Naming as Performative Re-Membering in Eden Robinson's 'Queen of the North,'" the scholarly arguments place Robinson's Haisla and Heiltsuk heritage at

---

<sup>10</sup> Shapira cites Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-1748) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) as examples of this narrative history linking women's unstable bodies to their social defiance.

<sup>11</sup> See Hoy's book *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*.

the centre of their critiques. Vikki Visvis's "Beyond the 'Talking Cure': The Practical Joke as Testimony for Intergenerational Trauma" and Kristina Fagan's "Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson" are most relevant to my thesis in that they provide specific discussions of Adelaine's gift. Visvis's article explores the "talking cure" as tactic for dealing with intergenerational trauma and includes a discussion of the curative function of Adelaine's final "gift" to her uncle. Visvis's focus on Adelaine's eventual "inventive repetition of her trauma" (59) applies to my own discussion of corporeal transgression as a form of resistance. Fagan's exploration of Aboriginal storytelling and humour to decode Adelaine's actions focuses, like Hoy's, on the necessity (and possible pitfalls) of coding research within cultural specificity, and suggests the cultural sensitivity needed when performing critical readings and scholarship of Indigenous writers such as Robinson.

Reviews of Atwood's *Wilderness Tips* and Robinson's *Traplines* (the collections in which the stories are found) are mixed. There is, however, a discernible pattern: the reviews of *Wilderness Tips* tend to focus on the text itself—how the stories work as a collection, in and through one another—while the reviews of *Traplines* emphasize the unhappiness of the characters as well as Robinson's talent as a writer. For instance, Gayle Greene writes for *The Women's Review of Books* that Atwood's characters "pick through the shards of the past, excavate buried selves, their own and others', in search of some clue, some key, some 'tips' to surviving the future" (6). Other reviewers point to Atwood's "unsettling, often startling" moves between the past and present and back again (Wilcox 7), not only within the short stories themselves, but in the collection as a whole. But for Robinson's *Traplines*, the reviews are much less about how the short stories speak to and about one another. Instead, reviews focus on

criticism of her writing style. For example, W. P. Kinsella states in an interview with *BC Bookworld* that Robinson's *Traplines* is "absolutely dreadful. Mediocre writing. Unpleasant stories. I was amazed it got the critical acclaim it did" (7). The critical acclaim to which Kinsella refers is detailed by Barbara Wickens in *Maclean's*, who describes how Robinson's first publishing deal for *Traplines* included an astounding launch in the fall of 1996 by four separate publishers in four different countries with an agreement also to publish Robinson's first novel *Monkey Beach* the following year.<sup>12</sup> Like Kinsella, Sybil Steinberg in *Publishers Weekly* refers to Robinson's *Traplines* as an "uninspired debut. . . . While her work has a certain raw energy, Robinson's material is both familiar and sensationalistic, lacking the gifts of characterization and voice" (429). James Marcus states in his *New York Times* review that Robinson "is not, to be sure without talent," yet "much of the time, the language in 'Traplines' is simply too flat," with her prose exhibiting an "odd anonymity" (21). Again in *Maclean's*, Judith Timson writes that "Robinson's writing is often powerful, but sometimes reportorial to the point of flatness. . . . But there is also a vein of quirkiness and humor (albeit black) that is somewhat leavening" (68). The discrepancy between the reviews of Atwood's and Robinson's books could simply be explained by Atwood's well-established corpus of writing at the time of the publication of *Wilderness Tips*, as opposed to the debut status of Robinson's book; critics may have felt more freedom to express their negative opinions about this "new kid on the block." Robinson may also have been taken to task for her sparse writing style and often unpleasant content because her work did not meet reviewers' expectations of Aboriginality, with very few Aboriginal signifiers in any story and only "Queen of the North" situated on a reserve. Dee Horne provides a much more informative review in *Canadian Literature*, revealing the overarching theme of *Traplines* as seen in "Queen

---

<sup>12</sup> The publishing houses were Knopf Canada, Henry Holt and Co. (US), Little Brown (UK), Rowohlt Verlag (Germany).

of the North”: “Robinson challenges the idea of loyalty for loyalty’s sake and demonstrates how family and community relations can become oppressive. Unlike the other stories [in *Traplines*], Robinson presents a protagonist who not only survives but ends the abuse” (161). As Horne claims, “Queen of North” demands that the reader confront the horrible truth of the cyclical nature of sexual abuse and violence, but also see evidence of a resourceful Indigenous teenager who is able to put an end to her victimization by turning her inherent femaleness into a weapon.

In her mostly favourable review of *Wilderness Tips* for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani pauses to critique what she considers to be certain weaker stories, referring to them as “edgy, satiric portraits of embittered women plotting revenge on the hapless, untrustworthy male species” (18). Kakutani cites both “Hairball” and “Weight” as part of this grouping of “weaker stories” (18). Unlike Kakutani, I do not believe “Hairball” can be so easily dismissed as a single-faceted story. “Hairball” is meant to be read satirically, but that satire reveals a fascinating exploration of the modern Western woman’s body and the ills that are both put upon and challenged by that body. Atwood’s short story begins with the protagonist Kat having just undergone surgery to remove a large ovarian cyst. Masculine, war-like metaphors are used to describe the battle to remove the possible malignancy; the physician “spoke of ‘going in’ the way she’d heard old veterans in TV documentaries speak of assaults on enemy territory. There was the same tensing of the jaw, the same fierce gritting of the teeth, the same grim enjoyment” (41). Kat’s body has gone astray into what author and theorist Susan Sontag would call “the kingdom of the sick” (3). In her groundbreaking treatises *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag argues that Western society stigmatizes certain diseases through punitive metaphors.<sup>13</sup> Citing cancer and AIDS as examples, Sontag looks to elucidate the lurid and often

---

<sup>13</sup> *Illness as Metaphor* was first written and published in 1978, while its sequel, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, was published in 1988. Since 1990, these two books have been published together under one cover.



violent masculinized metaphors in order to facilitate a possible “liberation from them” (4). As this short story demonstrates, not only is disease stigmatized, but also women’s bodies are stigmatized, most frequently for the very same reasons that make their bodies sexualized. Seen as leaky, unruly, and unstable, the female body is transgressive in its very nature. When the body manifests its transgressiveness in such a way that it cannot be ignored—such as Kat’s tumour—it is interpreted as grotesque. The female body is in its very nature a violation of cultural imperatives (Gimlin 5). However, these short stories demonstrate that the grotesque can work as a powerful tool in Kat’s and Adelaine’s favour, expressing the unspeakable for these female protagonists.

Like Sontag, whose writing is directed towards liberation from lurid metaphors of illness, Atwood’s Kat wishes to cast off negative metaphors of the female body, for she is “intensely interested in her own body, in anything it might choose to do or produce” (42), including her benign tumour. At first, Kat is curious about the tumour—its shape, size, and contents. When the doctor who performs the surgery declares the tumour to be as “big as a grapefruit” (42), Kat quickly interjects with what she considers to be a more appropriate food comparison: “Other people had grapefruits. ‘Coconut’ was better. It conveyed the hardness of it, and the hairiness, too” (42). And while this tumour merits removal, for it could well have been malignant, Kat is not disgusted by it, as is apparent in the comparison to nourishing and delicious food. In fact, she seems pleased with the tumour’s complexity, as the narrator’s description makes evident:

The hair in it was red—long strands of it wound round and round inside, like a ball of wet wool gone berserk or like the guck you pulled out of a clogged bathroom-sink drain. There were little bones in it too, or fragments of bone; bird

bones, the bones of a sparrow crushed by a car. There was a scattering of nails, toe or finger. There were five perfectly formed teeth (42).

The first sentence suggests that, like wool that has “gone berserk” or the “guck” found in drains, the body has transgressed; instead of running smoothly, Kat’s corporeality has gone awry and produced a tumour, making her body unstable and “grotesque.” The second part of the description of the tumour links the site of its excision to a battle-field, with body parts strewn about, hinting at the socially prescribed war metaphors for illness. However, the references to bones suggest frailty, with descriptors such as “little,” “fragments,” “bird bones,” and crushed “bones of a sparrow.” If the Hairball is, as Carol L. Beran states, a “hidden self brought to light” (78), perhaps even an unformed twin (Kat’s doctor leaves this possibility open), then the smallness and frailness of these bones can be read as the part of Kat that she has concealed from the outside world, and from herself. Only now is the unruly body expressing itself as it works to empower Kat in ways that are least expected.

Madeleine Davies, like Shapira, explores the way in which Atwood’s protagonists show signs of body anxiety. Davies writes that Atwood often “digs into Gothic parody or carnivalesque grotesquerie in her writing of the female body” (58). Shapira addresses the long-standing narrative history linking women’s unstable bodies with social defiance and transgression, arguing that “the female grotesque used to be a pivotal component in the derogatory stories that patriarchal culture told about women” (52). The narrative formula joining the “grotesque” female body to a transgressive female—a violator of social norms—is traced by Shapira in order to tease out ways in which the female “grotesque” is not necessarily an image of menace, but instead an “emblem of liberation” (54) in modern-day literature. The opposition of the good/contained woman to the bad/transgressive woman is displaced in Atwood’s short story

and reconfigured as a “pair of competing self-images—a sleek and contained professional body, and an embarrassing corporeality that threatens to leak out of every pore” (Shapira 65). I argue that Kat’s ultimate gifting of her tumour solidifies even further the concept of the female body as no longer representing an either/or dichotomy—contained/good versus transgressive/bad. While duality and doubleness are a hallmark of Atwood’s writing, “Hairball” presents a female character who transcends duality and whose identity is instead fractured into countless possibilities.

After her operation, Kat places the cut-out tumour in a bottle of formaldehyde and takes it home with her. The narrator indicates that she rationalizes this gesture in terms of proud ownership: “It was hers, it was benign, it did not deserve to be thrown away. She took it back to her apartment and stuck it on the mantelpiece. She named it Hairball” (43). Hairball is thus propelled into the category of a prized possession. Kat may pretend to place Hairball on the mantel as an homage to a taxidermist’s stuffed and mounted animal, “with fur and teeth looming over your fireplace” (43), but as the story unfolds, Hairball becomes much more than a trophy or prize. Hairball navigates from honoured possession to hidden self, as Beran argues. Indeed, Marlene Goldman concludes that it represents a “fragment of her [Kat’s] psyche made visible” (96), while Isabel Carrera Suarez argues that it signifies “the possibility of a self that she has not allowed to grow, but which crops up to remind her of the fact” (240). The tumour can indeed be understood as the body’s manifestation of that which is unspeakable or impermissible. However, the body, especially the transgressing portion of the body, acts more specifically as a gauge or symbol of Kat’s sense of power, or lack of it. As James Wilcox states in his review of *Wilderness Tips*, “the pickled tumor opens up another dimension, revising the story of Kat’s life in a way over which she, for once, has no control” (7). Indeed, the tumour starts off by making Kat feel

powerless and clearly out of control of her body, as well as her personal and professional life, since the time away from her office to undergo surgery and recuperate leads directly to her dismissal at work and the end of her personal relationship with her supervisor-lover. This helplessness shifts dramatically when the tumour transforms into a symbol of power instead, as Hairball ultimately manifests as Kat's pseudo-baby.

While Kat is in the throes of illness and surgery early in the narrative, there is also a rich description of her life before this one event of ill health, summarized through the transmutations of her name. Through the years she has whittled herself down from a "romanticized Katherine," to a "round-faced Kathy," to "blunt and no-bullshit" Kath, and finally "[w]hen she ran away to England, she sliced herself down to Kat. It was economical, street-feline, and pointed as a nail" (45). Kat wants her body, like her given name, to function as a projection of her inner desire to be taken seriously. She wants to be respected in her chosen profession as editor of a fashion magazine, and the contained, firm, pointed body and name speak her self-perceived power. Even her clothes play an important role in projecting this power, for Kat is described at one point in the narrative as wearing an "aggressive touch-me-if-you-dare suede outfit in armor gray" (54), a description which again employs metaphors of battle and war. Moreover, Kat's corporeality and given name not only emulate one another, but also evolve in order to reflect her time and space. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz's examines the corporeal experiences that are unique to women and suggests new theories surrounding women's sexed corporeality. Because Grosz believes the body to be socially constructed, she argues that it is subject to an array of inscriptions and rewritings. Grosz posits that the female body is proffered as *raison d'être* for women's social standing and presumed intellectual capabilities: "[W]omen's corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and

cognitive abilities of the two sexes. By implication, women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities" (14). Kat's body is a case in point; her tumour—an abnormality, an invasion, a transgression—is a physical manifestation of disobedience to the hegemonic masculinized ideal. Years of self-containment and the spoils of such containment—a respected career on the rise, an ongoing affair with her boss—unravel because of her body. As Goldman argues, "Kat, the creator and purveyor of glossy, two-dimensional bodies, finds her carefully managed existence suddenly disrupted by what transpires in the murky depths of her own body" (65). The years of moulding her name and controlling her body are over. The symbol of her body's transgression—Hairball—pushes Kat to make a bold empowering act that celebrates her body's "grotesque" nature. In celebrating the grotesque, the protagonist discovers the power that is achievable when one recognizes and accepts one's own body dis-order.

Goldman sees Kat's actions as evidence of a misguided hunt for power; she argues that Kat "ponders her violent predatory behaviour—the smash-and-grab apocalyptic mentality that guided her every move. In accordance with apocalyptic thinking, she assumed she would attain paradise by engaging in violence. Ironically, paradise recedes, and her life is in ruins, or worse, has been entirely erased. . . . Kat realizes that her quest for power has not enhanced her life but, instead, eradicated it" (96-97). I argue that instead of Kat's quest for a successful career and personal life going up in smoke and flames, as Goldman suggests, her quest for power has pushed her to inhabit and perform a body that is highly self-controlled. The appearance of the tumour, however, provides evidence that her body is in some ways out of her control. The tumour is a call to action of sorts, offering itself as a catalyst for Kat to gain a greater sense of "body wisdom," a term which Baukje Miedema, Janet M. Stoppard, and Vivienne Anderson

define as a “[c]ommunication with our bodies that reflects the experiences and contexts of our lives” (313). This communication with her body finally begins to occur after the discovery of Hairball. Throughout most of the narrative, Kat has rejected the idea of ever having children: “Twice she had abortions, because the men in question were not up for the alternative. She learned to say that she didn’t want children anyway, that if she longed for a rugrat she would buy a gerbil” (48). But with the arrival of Hairball, Kat begins an honest communication with her body, literally listening to Hairball’s filaments wave and buzz (57). By so doing, she comes to conclude that she has in fact yearned for a family of her own: “She sees now what she’s wanted, what she’s been missing. . . . The Gerald with a house and a small child and a picture of his wife in a silver frame on his desk. She wants to be in that silver frame. She wants the child. She’s been robbed” (55). In a heartbreaking description, Atwood has Kat wallowing in self pity, picturing Hairball

as a child. It has come out of her, after all. It is flesh of her flesh. Her child with Gerald, her thwarted child, not allowed to grow normally. Her warped child, taking its revenge. “Hairball,” she says. “You’re so ugly. Only a mother could love you.” She feels sorry for it. She feels loss. Tears run down her face. (57)

Kat has fought tooth and nail to project her corporeality, her career, and her relationship with her lover as impregnable, but this narrative demonstrates a Kat that, because of Hairball, is vulnerable. Shapira argues that “Kat’s medical crisis brings about and symbolically announces her exclusion from the sphere to which, the story hints, she secretly aspires—that of domesticity and its maternal gratification” (61). However, Kat’s breakdown should not necessarily be read as a professional, career-driven woman coming to her senses and realizing she wants a husband and children. I read the tears as not so much for the lost possibility of a family, as for the realization

that her body is, in fact, unruly; she has projected herself as contained and in complete control, but in the end, her body has metaphorically spoken, through Hairball, to indicate the opposite. Here the tumour becomes not only a symbol of the familial life she discovers she could have had, but also a physical manifestation of the “grotesque” as powerful matter, matter that will act as catalyst for her rebellious act. The grotesque becomes a performance of power for Kat, in which it serves as an “emblem of liberation” (Shapira 54) and the possibility of female threat.

Food and consumption play a pivotal role in Atwood’s short story, so much so that, in a kind of reworking of her 1969 novel *The Edible Woman*, the body becomes not only that which consumes, but is itself consumable. There are hints early in the text that the body is an object of consumption, such as the similes linking Hairball to grapefruit and coconut. The most obvious indication of the corporeal as edible is made by the protagonist when she explains her name to Gerald using sexually suggestive references to a specific type of food: “‘It’s Kat as in KitKat. That’s a chocolate bar. Melts in your mouth.’ She gave him her stare, quirked her mouth, just a twitch. Gerald became flustered” (49). Here Kat uses her body as a tool to gain a prestigious job and lover. Gerald himself is described as having been given a “hunger to impress” (50) when he purchases a box of artisanal chocolate truffles for Kat after their first indiscretion. When Kat arrives at work unannounced after her surgery, the description of Gerald is also marked with consumption metaphors: “He’s beautifully done up, in a lick-my-neck silk shirt open at the throat, an eat-your-heart-out Italian silk-and-wool loose-knit sweater. . . . He’s a money man who lusted after art, and now he’s got some, now he is some. Body art. Her art. She’s done her job well; he’s finally sexy” (54). The clothes deliciously adorning Gerald’s body create a sense of power, a delectable aura. The embellishment and decoration of the clothing signal especially his attainment of power over her: “She looks at his neck. She longs for him, hates herself for it, and

is powerless” (55). This sense of powerlessness is fleeting, however, as Kat ultimately creates a greater sense of body wisdom through a particularly rebellious and transgressive act.

The protagonist uses the “grotesque” of her body as retribution for both her personal and professional rejection. After her dismissal at work, Kat receives an invitation to a cocktail party hosted by Gerald and his wife. As a means of reversing her sense of powerlessness, Kat hatches a monstrous plan. She purchases a box of David Wood Food Shop chocolate truffles (the same kind Gerald had bought for her after their first sexual encounter); disguises Hairball as a large chocolate truffle by covering it with powdered cocoa; wraps it in foil, pink tissue paper, and a mauve bow; and places it in the box of truffles, which she sends to Gerald’s house. As the narrator notes, “It’s her gift, valuable and dangerous. It’s her messenger, but the message it will deliver is its own. It will tell the truth, to whoever asks. It’s right that Gerald should have it; after all, it’s his child too” (59). The manifestation of the body dis-order becomes her form of resistance. Goldman reads this *dénouement* as evidence of Kat and Gerald’s exploitive connection: “All along, the text has hinted at the violent and consumptive basis of their relationship, but, with this act, Kat foregrounds a distinctly apocalyptic, cannibalistic element” (98). Indeed, consumption is significant in interpreting the power dynamics between Kat and Gerald, but what I believe to be even more pertinent is the disobedience of the body that triggers Kat’s own disobedient gesture. As Shapira notes, “finding herself excluded from the normative family unit, [Kat] violates its sanctity with a hostile offering of blood and gore—an offering taken from the turbulent, ‘transgressive’ depths of her own body” (Shapira 62). Shapira argues that Atwood’s “Hairball” ultimately questions whether or not the female grotesque serves as an “image of female menace” (54) or as an “emblem of liberation” (54) because the gaze on the body is no longer that of a man, but here replaced by that of a woman. It is Kat herself who has



to decode Hairball, with its “red wool” and “bird bones.” It is the female protagonist who develops greater body wisdom through her dis-ordered body, with the “grotesque” act exemplifying the possible power of the female—the power to cause pain to others, the power to revel in the abject body, the power to find pleasure in “outrageous” behaviour (59).

Scholarly critics propose a mix of possibilities in regard to the climax and conclusion of “Hairball.” Some, such as Davidson, see the gifting of the pseudo-baby as a loss of power for Kat: “Effective as the revenge is, however, there is a way in which it doesn’t work. . . . She ends up bereft of job, Gerald, and Hairball” (184). An apt point, but I wonder if revenge was in fact the primary goal of gifting Hairball. I find Shapira’s claim much more convincing: “The story thus foregrounds, in highly concrete form, the act of outrageous display itself as a catalyst for discovery and, potentially, for self-liberation” (68). I would also add that the gifting of the tumour is not only an act that confers liberation, but one that ultimately uses humour to empower, since cats cough up hairballs. During an extremely painful circumstance, Kat’s macabre humour provides proof of the inherent power gained through an acceptance of one’s own body dis-order.

Eden Robinson’s “Queen of the North,” like Atwood’s “Hairball,” is a poignant examination of the transgressive female body, here also violated by another. However, the narration of these two stories is dissimilar, with Adelaine as a first-person narrator in “Queen of the North” and “Hairball” using a third-person limited perspective. This first-person narration used by Robinson in “Queen of the North” gives immediacy to the story, a very personal perspective on the emotions felt by a victim of sexual abuse and the ways in which those feelings are masked. The first instance Adelaine describes that exemplifies this body masquerade is a Christmas day as a youngster when her abuser, her Uncle Josh, gives her a much-coveted Barbie

Doll speedboat: “I unwrapped it slowly, my skin crawling. Yes, it was the Barbie Doll speedboat. My mouth smiled” (187). Outwardly Adelaine’s body performs the culturally acceptable smile for her audience: her mother, sister, and Uncle Josh. Inwardly however, Adelaine is not smiling, and the reader knows that her “skin [is] crawling” because she understands the gift as bribe for her silence. Just as Kat’s self-disciplining her body as stratagem proves ultimately impossible to maintain (evidenced by the presence of Hairball), Adelaine, too, comes to realize that self-disciplining the body in order to exhibit the attitude that all is well in her life does little to assuage the pain she is feeling.

Undeterred, Adelaine tries another path. She seeks out a numbing of the body in order to deal with the incestuous abuse that has been and continues to be committed against her. One of the first images that Robinson presents is Adelaine’s remembrance of her childhood home and her metaphoric silencing: “Whenever I see abandoned buildings, I think of our old house in the village, a rickety shack by the swamp where the frogs used to live. It’s gone now. The council covered the whole area with rocks and gravel” (185). Kat may be “street-feline” (Atwood 54), landing upright no matter the emotional or physical injury incurred, but like the frogs, Horne argues, Adelaine “has ceased to sing. She has become covered up by rocks and gravel, by a hard exterior in which she acts out her abuse in displays of physical aggression, sexual promiscuity and other forms of rebellion” (161). This smothering of the ecological world with rock and gravel is a symbol of Adelaine’s relationship with her family and friends. Adelaine is symbolically blanketed by her uncle’s sexual transgressions, inhibited from speaking the truth to close friends or even family. Moreover, Adelaine’s uncle attempts to maintain power over her body by purchasing her silence through gifts of candy and toys when she is young, and gifts of money when she is a teen. These gifts, like the metaphorical filler of rocks and gravel, are meant

to prevent Adelaine from speaking the truth. In the end, however, Adelaine's body speaks by presenting the final gift of this short story, a pseudo-baby in the form of a post-abortion blood clot, allowing her to reclaim her voice and power in the process.

Readers learn on the first page that the "Queen of the North" story takes its name from the boat owned by Adelaine's uncle, solidifying from the outset the importance of Josh's character to the protagonist. In a reoccurring daydream, or arguably a reoccurring nightmare, Adelaine pictures herself standing at the shoreline, watching her uncle's boat come into view: "Usually I can will myself to move, but sometimes I'm frozen where I stand" (186). This is the first instance or hint at Josh's power over Adelaine's body. A second reoccurring dream, in contrast, demonstrates a yearning for vicious retaliatory action on Adelaine's behalf. In this dream, Adelaine unwittingly reaches into her closet to find "Uncle Josh's head, arms, and legs squashed inside, severed from the rest of his body. My clothes are soaked dark red with his blood" (187). The dismemberment of the uncle's body in the dream is one of the first instances of gallows humour in the text, as Adelaine responds to the severed body parts with the quip: "Well, what do you know. . . . Wishes do come true" (187). This is significant because she and her sister have earlier been described as breaking the wishbone in the Christmas turkey. Until this point in the narrative, there is uncertainty surrounding Adelaine's discomfort with her uncle. Adelaine's wisecrack clearly defines that her hatred of her uncle is so strong she not only wishes him dead, but wishes his body dismembered.

While Atwood explores a female character who restricts and contains her body, Robinson delves into the other side of the body spectrum, investigating a female body that is out of control, evident in both physical violence and drug abuse. Adelaine's pain is directed primarily toward other young women through violent physical brawls. In the first of five beatings described in this

story,<sup>14</sup> Adelaine compulsively seeks out an activity to numb her physically: “I want to say I’m not part of it, but that’s my foot hooking her ankle and tripping her while Ronny takes her down with a blow to the temple. . . . The girl’s now curled up under the sink and I punch her and kick her and smash her face into the floor” (188). In the scenes in which Adelaine fights, the narrative not only includes short, violent verbs but also shifts from past to present tense to give immediacy to these acts of physical violence. Compounded with drinking, evidenced with the reference to “chug buddies” (188), and with drug abuse apparent in Adelaine’s friendship with her cousin Ronny who “could get hold of almost any drug you wanted” (188), the fighting demonstrates that Adelaine’s quest is clearly not only to numb her emotions by numbing her corporeality through drugs and alcohol, but also to channel outwards the abuse that she has experienced at the hands of her uncle. The abused becomes the abuser in much the same way that, the reader later learns, Uncle Josh was abused himself by a priest at the Residential school he attended as a child. Indeed, both Adelaine and Uncle Josh attempt to take power by physically dominating others, sexually in Josh’s case, manifesting the internal grotesqueness that they suffer outwardly onto others’ bodies.

While Adelaine remains determined as a teenager to exhibit or speak her transgressed body through violent behavior—beating other young women, drinking and abusing drugs to excess, defacing her own body with a shoddy tattoo—as a youngster, it is Adelaine’s body that is in fact transgressed by another. In the section of the story in which Adelaine describes the abuse, her narration, like that of the fights with other women, employs present-tense verbs,

‘Moooo.’ I copy the two aliens on *Sesame Street* mooing to a telephone. Me and Uncle Josh are watching television together... Uncle Josh undoes his pants.

‘Moo.’ I keep my eyes on the TV and say nothing as he moves toward me. I’m

---

<sup>14</sup> The other beatings occur on pages 188, 197, 199, and 214.

not a baby like Alice, who runs to Mommy about everything. When it's over he'll have treats for me. It's like when the dentist gives me extra suckers for not crying, not even when it really hurts. (190)

This passage is the first explicit statement of the sexual abuse that Josh repeatedly commits against his niece. Visvis interprets the mooing at the television as Adelaine's survival mechanism, where the "imitation during trauma . . . serves to remove the victim from the traumatic event, to dissociate her from the aggressor" (57). This mimicry is Adelaine's first strategy of disassociation, her first method of coping with the transgressive acts repeatedly committed against her body. In many ways this mimicry could also be associated with Adelaine's own abusive actions later as a young woman; her physical abuse of other young women mimics the power imbalance between abuser and abused in her encounters with her uncle. Unable to end her role as sexually abused victim, she takes on the power role of physical abuser, hurting herself and others in the process.

This stratagem of expressing physical violence to speak her own sexually transgressed body is futile for Adelaine, apparent in the number of occurrences and the escalating intensity of the beatings. That said, Adelaine uses mimicry again as a young woman to cope with the ongoing transgressions of her uncle. Visvis argues that this stratagem is evidenced in the acquisition of her nickname, Karaoke, during a night of drug abuse and the ensuing high-jacking of a karaoke machine throughout which Adelaine fends off others with a switchblade: "I remember nothing else about that night after I got my first hit of acid. My real name is Adelaine, but the next day a girl from school sees me coming and yells, 'Hey, look, it's Karaoke!'" (192).<sup>15</sup> Visvis contends that the nickname is greater proof of Adelaine's silenced corporeality, signifying

---

<sup>15</sup> This drug-induced episode provides greater evidence of macabre humour, as the videotape of her actions is rejected as "unsuitable for family viewing" by America's Funniest Home Videos.

“her muted state. Like a karaoke singer, who is denied her own lyrics or her own language, Adelaine is reticent on the subject of her trauma because the absence of a suitable addressee makes the ‘talking cure’ an infeasible method of treatment” (45). For Visvis, the act of sharing or revealing the transgressions being committed against one’s body is impractical for Adelaine because of the lack of appropriate listener. However, there are three occasions when Adelaine attempts to reveal the sexual abuse to her cousin Ronny (189), her mother (196), and her boyfriend Jimmy (200), each time stopping herself from “articulating her story and her feelings, as she anticipates negative responses from her potential auditors” (Visvis 45). In a quiet moment with Jimmy, Adelaine yearns to share the secret abuses that have been committed against her: “I almost told him then. I wanted to tell him. I wanted someone else to know and not have it locked inside me. I kept starting and then chickening out. What was the point? He’d probably pull away from me in horror, disgusted, revolted” (200). As with many people who experience feelings of culpability in regards to sexual assault, Adelaine fears that she will be blamed.

However, Fagan concludes that instead of fear alone driving Adelaine’s inaction, cultural taboo could also be a factor preventing her verbal recrimination. Fagan argues that there are

two contradictory impulses at work for Aboriginal people when it comes to speaking about sexual abuse. There is often a need for them to speak about traumatic experiences in order to change what is happening. But there is also a strong cultural prohibition against making direct or angry accusations. There exists simultaneously a need to tell and a sense that one should not tell. (210)

This reticence on the part of Adelaine is in step with Fagan’s point concerning First Nations communication practices. Moreover, Fagan offers humour as possible interpretive strategy through which to read Adelaine’s “grotesque” gift: “Storytelling and humour offer responses to

this dilemma, and can act as alternatives to witnessing” (210). Because of their inability to speak that which is unspeakable to them, both Adelaine and Kat from “Hairball” use gallows humour to get their point across to the men who have harmed them.

Since neither Adelaine nor Kat can vocalize their emotions about their exploitation, both instead turn to their bodies to express the inexpressible. Whereas Kat uses Hairball to reveal the affair between herself and Gerald to Gerald’s wife and party guests, Adelaine deals with her dilemma by resorting to what Fagan identifies as “the indirect communication of the joke” (221). Thus, macabre humour, by way of body dis-order, is the method of choice for Kat and Adelaine to “cure” what ails them. For Adelaine, the “joke” includes a collage that reveals the cycle of sexual abuse, through which the abused become the abuser: “I use a recent picture of Uncle Josh that I raided from Mom’s album. I paste his face onto the body of Father Archibald and my face onto the boy. The montage looks real enough. Uncle Josh is smiling down at a younger version of me” (213). This pastiche speaks the grotesque on Adelaine’s behalf, making the heads of abuser and victim interchangeable in a grotesque parody of the abusive relationship between Father Archibald and Josh. When Adelaine first discovers the picture of the priest with her uncle as a child, she immediately guesses at the inappropriate nature of their relationship based on the history of abuse perpetrated by the clergy on Indigenous children at Residential schools. As Adelaine’s uncle enters her bedroom one evening (readers assume to rape her), she imitates a possible verbal exchange between the priest and his victim. Taking on the persona of Josh as a child, Adelaine addresses her uncle: “Father Archibald? . . . I’ve said my prayers” (212). Her irony in the face of a painful incident is a form of resistance, ending the transgression before it has a chance at being committed again and causing Josh to back away and leave the bedroom. Adelaine uses a form of mimicry to deal with the sexual abuse of her uncle. She transcends her

body by taking on the role of her uncle as youngster, gaining power within the relationship by forcing him to acknowledge how he felt about similar abuse.

Along with her verbal parody, Adelaine uses her body dis-order to speak for and empower herself. Having returned from Vancouver, where she has undergone an abortion to end a pregnancy resulting from Josh's sexual abuse, Adelaine performs the climactic "joke": she prepares to gift both the collaged photo and a pseudo-fetus in the form of blood clot to her abuser. Visvis calls this preparation a "tendentious practical joke, a potentially empowering traumatic testimony" (47). I argue that Adelaine's celebration of the grotesque through the gift demonstrates her new-found ability to action. Her description explicitly represents the gift as one that mimics the much earlier "gifts," both literal and figurative and almost always traumatic, that she has received from her uncle: "My period is vicious this month. I've got clots the size and texture of liver. I put one of them in a Ziploc bag. I put the picture and the bag in a hatbox. I tie it up with a bright red ribbon. I place it on the kitchen table and go upstairs to get a jacket. . . . The note inside the box reads, 'It was yours so I killed it'" (213). Like Kat, who has gifted the result of her body dis-order, her tumour, Adelaine uses her abnormally heavy post-abortion menses as pseudo-baby. Gifting, as it were, the aborted fetus, she communicates the tangible results of the abuse. Through her gift she expresses the power inherent within the misfit body, a body that does not enact social constructions of female decorum or behaviour. Adelaine may be metaphorically silenced like the frogs and unable to speak her own words (apparent in her nickname Karaoke), but the dis-order of her body powerfully speaks on her behalf. The bow and wrapping of the gift conceal the punch that is hidden inside. Indeed, the same argument can be made for Kat in "Hairball," in which the chocolate box and mauve bow around the tumour hide the malevolent gesture of gifting Hairball. Whether a benign tumour or a post-abortion blood clot, both gifts



celebrate the unruly body of these unruly women, bringing an end to their relationships with their respective lover and abuser.

In the introduction to this chapter, I note the uncertainty of the endings of both short stories, especially about whether such endings demonstrate the transgressing body as empowering. Does the final “gift” have a curative function? In regards to Kat, the text reveals an ambiguous ending: “She [Kat] has done an outrageous thing, but she doesn’t feel guilty. She feels light and peaceful and filled with charity, and temporarily without a name” (59). Her act of gifting her tumour is indeed shocking, but necessarily so. This dark humour, this ability to express amusement at the dis-order of her own body, demonstrates the development of a body wisdom in Kat and the inherent power that comes with this development. Her sense of namelessness indicates a release from the Kat of old, “pointed as a nail” (45), into something that is nameless, unspeakable, and thus open to new professional, familial, and romantic possibilities.

In “Queen of the North,” however, the gift is opened by an unexpected recipient. It is Adelaine’s boyfriend, Jimmy, who finds the gift and opens it, not her Uncle Josh. Without seeking an explanation from Adelaine, Jimmy leaves her home and joins the crew of the *Queen of the North*. Visvis astutely describes the two possible readings of Jimmy’s motives for joining Josh’s *Queen of the North* as a crew member (53-54), one of which is based on evidence from Robinson’s subsequent novel *Monkey Beach*: either Jimmy is disgusted by her and blames her, as Adelaine has expected, or he understands what has happened and wants to seek revenge. In either scenario, Visvis sees Adelaine’s “joke” as ineffective because the intended recipient has not seen it. Moreover the concluding description of Adelaine as again expressing a paralyzed corporeality suggests only a partial empowerment: “I hide in the bushes near the docks and wait all night. . . . I come out of the bushes and stand on the dock, watching the *Queen of the North*

disappear” (214-15). At the same time, her powerful act of gifting the “grotesque” demonstrated the possibility for an end to the abuse, and with Josh’s departure and presumed death in *Monkey Beach*, Adelaine has ended the abuse. She may still experience a painful inability to speak the transgressions committed against her corporeality, but the macabre humour of gifting the “grotesque” brings her closer to casting off her past silencing, like the frogs, and only mimicking speech, like a karaoke singer, in order to “stand on the dock” empowered by her body dis-order. However, the sinking of the *Queen of North* and apparent drowning of Josh and Jimmy in *Monkey Beach* certainly complicate this reading because it is Jimmy who takes the most decisive action and his story does not end well. With such a reading Robinson could be suggesting that there are no uncomplicated endings to stories of abuse that begin in Residential school.

Both Kat and Adelaine use their bodies in a manner that transcends cultural imperatives. Using macabre humour, Atwood and Robinson turn misfit portions of women’s bodies—tumour and blood clot—into not only symbols of rebellion, but also the means through which their female characters perform power. With their bodies accosted on all fronts, Kat’s and Adelaine’s corporeality provides a vehicle for their ultimate transgressive acts which then allow them, at least in part, to liberate their bodies. While both women ultimately lose their lovers, I hesitate to suggest that such endings need be read negatively. Atwood’s and Robinson’s protagonists concretely display how transgressive corporeality coupled with macabre humour can be the medium through which women can speak their abuse. The curative function of the final gifts demonstrates the inherent power gained through an acceptance and use of one’s own body dis-order. As the conclusions indicate, however, Kat’s and Adelaine’s outrageous acts in gifting their pseudo-babies have troubling consequences for innocent third parties such as Gerald’s wife and Adelaine’s boyfriend, Jimmy. As Atwood’s narrator notes, through such acts, “There will be

distress, there will be questions. Secrets will be unearthed. There will be pain” (59). For both Kat and Adelaine, though, the pain is necessary for healing to occur.

## Chapter 2

“Nipples are no-nos”: The Mastectomized Body in Bonnie Burnard’s

“Nipple Man,” Carol Shields’s “Eros,” and Linda Svendsen’s “White Shoulders”

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which Margaret Atwood and Eden Robinson use macabre humour to demonstrate the power inherent within a woman’s misfit body. In this chapter, I examine literary representations of women’s post-surgical selves, specifically mastectomized breasts, exemplified by the transgressive bodies in Bonnie Burnard’s “Nipple Man,” Carol Shields’s “Eros,” and Linda Svendsen’s “White Shoulders.” The women’s bodies in these stories no longer mirror hegemonic beauty ideals and popular social discourses about the body. In her book *Bodies*, psychoanalyst Susie Orbach critiques a distressingly narrow aesthetic, “an increasingly homogenised and homogenising form” (3). This limiting aesthetic is described by scholar Susan Bordo in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* as a form that is “trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (32), in which the “media norms of the beautiful breast” (20) are enhanced breasts via implants. Breasts signify womanliness, femininity, sexuality, and eroticism to women and men alike; it is no wonder, then, that both sexes experience difficulty coming to terms with a woman’s mastectomized chest. For women, the loss of a breast or breasts and the fear associated with cancer are not the only hurdles impeding their progression towards what Susan Sontag calls the “kingdom of the well” (3). Women must also navigate social discourses that espouse the importance, almost the necessity, of regaining their pre-surgical appearance through reconstructive surgery and/or prosthetic(s). And while female experience is central to Bonnie Burnard’s “Nipple Man,” Carol Shields’s “Eros,” and Linda Svendsen’s “White Shoulders,” male responses to both the pre- and post-

surgical female body are also explored in detail in the stories—responses ranging from the perversely curious to the abusively incestuous.

In this chapter, I ask the following questions in order to clarify these reactions: How does Iris Marion Young define the “best breast” ideal, and who decides the determining factors of such breasts? How are prostheses and breast reconstruction related to femininity and identity? What, if any, is the connection between the phallus and the breast? In these three short stories, Burnard, Shields, and Svendsen query women characters’ reactions to traumatic breast loss, and then focus on male characters’ sexual responses to the women’s bodies. There has been little published literary criticism on these three stories, but theories about the breast proposed by Young and by Samantha Crompton and Marilyn Yalom help to inform my arguments about the way that the breast is sometimes implicitly compared to the erect or flaccid penis. I argue that the pre- and post-surgical bodies of Marion in “Nipple Man,” Ann in “Eros,” and Irene in “White Shoulders” are transgressive by way of their non-adherence to the breasted social script and with some of the women performing power by continuing to insist they are sexual beings. These characters’ mastectomized chests and/or their breast surrogates (including, though not limited to, prostheses) open up new possibilities for sexual arousal and satisfaction, as well as the potential for unhealthy sexual expression or repression.

This chapter highlights a spectrum of responses—from positive to deadly—to the female breast and its loss through cancer. I begin my analysis by evaluating Burnard’s “Nipple Man” from the collection *Casino and Other Stories* (1999). The anonymous reviewer for *Books in Canada* calls the collection “beautifully written and shaped” and notes that while Burnard “has a special sympathy for divorced women and adolescents,” the collection is dedicated “‘To my brothers,’” and thus Burnard indicates a knowledge “that men are human too” (48). Certainly

“Nipple Man” suggests this knowledge, as the focus of the story is a divorced middle-aged man. In this story, the third-person limited narration recounts the sexual fetishizing of women’s breasts and nipples by the main character, John McLarty, most specifically through his budding relationship with Marion Alderson. Unbeknownst to John, Marion’s body exhibits the scars of a double mastectomy. While initially exploring a sexual commodification of all women’s breasts, the short story concludes with evidence of John empathizing with Marion’s difficulty to express and take pleasure in her sexuality without her breasts, as he makes it his quest to arouse both himself and Marion in new and unexpected ways.

Following the discussion of Burnard’s “Nipple Man” is an examination of Shields’s short story “Eros” from the collection *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. First published in the collection *Desire in Seven Voices* (1999) edited by Lorna Crozier, “Eros” is a short story Shields wrote in a response to an invitation for an essay or other work on the subject of desire. Crozier’s writing prompts included these questions: “When do you trust your desire? When do you censor it? When is it a source of power, and when a source of distress?” (qtd. in Di Michele 20). Like “Nipple Man’s” depiction of a man driven by his libido, “Eros” introduces Alex, a sexually aggressive dinner guest, sitting next to the protagonist, Ann. Shields’s short story surveys how the sexual self is ignited and expressed, moving from the present-time dinner party conversation about sexuality to past experiences of sexual awakening by Ann and her ex-husband, Benjamin. While this story also exemplifies the difficulties of sexual expression and sexual confidence post-mastectomy, it presents the pre-surgical female body, too, as problematic. Through the limited third-person narration, Ann’s character is shown to demonstrate sexuality in a continual flux as circumstances and conditions change, corporeally and externally.

Shields's depiction of Ann's sexuality rising up to meet the challenges of the post-surgical self contrasts sharply with the problematic sexual reactions in Svendsen's "White Shoulders," first published in *Saturday Night* magazine and republished in the collection *Marine Life* (1992). In Svendsen's short story, the first-person narrator, Adele, recounts the horrifying results of her sister Irene's battle with breast cancer and mastectomy—horrifying not just in a personal corporeal sense, but also in relation to the sexual frustration of Irene's husband, Peter, and his incestuous abuse of their daughter Jill, which ultimately results in Jill's suicide. Because of the cancer diagnosis and decision to excise the cancerous breast, both Irene and Peter come to understand Irene as asexual; without a perceived sexual self post-diagnosis and post-surgery, Irene comes to embody the role of mother figure to Peter. His refusal to see his wife as a sexual being acts as a catalyst for him, appallingly, to turn his sexual attention to the breasted sexual surrogate: his daughter.

In Young's essay "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling," she argues that a woman's breasts are essential to her sense of self and self image (76). Young explores breasts as cultural constructions, with the breast manifesting as symbol of femaleness: "In our culture that focuses to the extreme on breasts, a woman . . . often feels herself judged and evaluated according to the size and contours of her breasts, and indeed she often is. For her and for others, her breasts are the daily visible and tangible signifier of her womanliness" (76). As demonstrated in these three short stories, breasts are signifiers of women's sexuality and femininity. Moreover, breasts signify the ultimate object of sexual arousal for the male characters. For instance, in the blatantly named "Nipple Man," the protagonist's first wife, Carol, describes the lewd incidents that have befallen her at History department gatherings and dinner parties over the years of her marriage to John. She recalls to her husband one particular incident as a "whispered longing

expressed in their [Carol and John's] own backyard by a dull-witted Yank . . . to see her nipples. She said she'd wanted to strip off her blouse and bra right there at the barbecue and say, There you go darlin', and aren't they as plain as plain can be, and you will notice they are not erect under your gaze and there's not a snowball's chance in hell they ever will be, and now will you please just pass me that jar of mustard" (131). While Carol had wanted to perform these actions and pronounce her thoughts, she in fact says nothing and instead simply walks away. This passage not only reveals the limited repertoire of possible responses available to a woman in a circumstance of sexual impropriety, but also reinforces the extreme brazenness of sexual demand by men of women in Western culture. As Young makes clear, breasts are frequently reduced to little more than objects of sexual appeal to heterosexual males: "They are called boobs, knockers, knobs; they are toys to be grabbed, squeezed, handled. In the total scheme of the objectification of women, breasts are the primary things" (77). If women's sense of self is wrapped up within their breasted experience, as Young maintains, then the objectification that occurs plays a role in forming each woman's identity as a female person in Western society. Twenty-first century culture—heteronormative and sexist—enacts pressure on women to perform their femininity through their breasts and on men to perform their masculinity by way of breast objectification. Both sexes are thus caught in reducing breasts to objects of consumption for the heterosexual male gaze and touch, with women's sexual pleasure through their breasts a secondary concern.

How then does one perform one's femininity minus a breast or two after mastectomy, and similarly perform one's hetero-masculinity in response to the post-mastectomy female body? As health sociologist Samatha Crompvoets argues, "the current treatment of the post-surgical body within breast cancer culture and wider society allows no space for women to reconceptualise their bodies as normal, feminine or complete in the absence of a breast or breasts. Instead, the



mastectomized body is positioned as transient, to be ‘fixed’ as soon as possible” (4). Because the mastectomized chest is transgressive—defying the “best breast” cultural script (Young)—it must be understood as temporary. Such a transgressive corporeality cannot be understood as permanent; the body must realign, as best it can, to the feminine ideal in order to perform its femininity. In Burnard’s “Nipple Man,” femininity is performed through the illusion of best breasts, while the fetishizing of the female breast in heteromascularity and heterosexuality is transferred to other body parts.

The protagonist, a history professor whose sexual escapades with his students and penchant for nipples are well-documented, is a stereotypical “boob man.” He is a caricature of the middle-aged heterosexual male whose sexual virility needs validating. John’s fascination with women’s breasts, especially their nipples, begins during his marriage to Carol. On the night when Carol recounts the story of the lewd request to see her nipples by the visiting professor, John and Carol decide to skip a dinner party: “They’d gone instead to a dismal Bergman film and seen Liv Ullmann’s nipples, which, if he remembered correctly, and he did, were not as plain as plain can be. . . . And from that night his dreams began, habitually, to welcome other women. He couldn’t remember dreaming about other women before, not habitually” (131-32). John finds himself bombarded by images of breasts and nipples; whether in conversation with Carol, on film by way of Ullmann, in his dreams, or later with his students, he cannot seem to satisfy his sexual desire, instead participating in an unfulfilled fetishizing of the female breast. Feminist social theorist Iris Marion Young considers breasts to be not only a cultural construction, but also a fetishized and oddly masculinized commodity: “Breasts are the symbol of feminine sexuality [for men], so the ‘best’ breasts are like the phallus: high, hard, and pointy” (77). Burnard’s character is in step with Western culture’s hetero-male gaze that understands the female ideal by

way of the male sexual organ, for the “fetish is an object that stands in for the phallus” (Young 77). John recognizes the achievement of sexual pleasure as contingent on an erect penis, and thus, according to Young’s theory, appreciates a woman’s breasts under those same guidelines of look and feel. While the “best breast” is illusory for most women, deviating increasingly as they age, nurse babies, or experience breast scarring or loss due to cancer, it remains the cultural ideal for women to enact and heterosexual men to fetishize. However, when a woman loses breasts to cancer, as has John’s new love interest Marion, she is culturally pressured to approximate the best breast ideal with either cosmetic surgery or prosthetic device(s). Marion performs her femininity by approximating the ideal breasts through the use of prostheses. However, when the performance is dropped, quite literally into her lap, both Marion and John must determine a new script of sexual pleasure outside the purview of the breast.

John’s fascination with nipples and breasts is exacerbated when Carol eventually leaves their marriage, as the narrator notes, taking “the kids and her nipples and most of the best family photographs” (132). His breast fascination turns into a full-blown fetishization: “He’d found an apartment and was no sooner into it and lonely than they started to show up in his office, the women from his dreams, with their nipples” (133). This passage underscores the anonymity and interchangeability of women for John, referenced as “they,” identified only by their look-alike nipples, and appearing in dream-like fashion in his life.

As demonstrated by John, nipples are culturally constructed as shameful as well as desirable, whispered about in hushed tones or gawked at in foreign films. One of the reasons that nipples, desired and ubiquitous, are so fetishized is because of their concealment. According to Young, “Nipples are indecent. Cleavage is good—the more, the better—and we can wear bikinis that barely cover the breasts, but the nipples must be carefully obscured. . . . Nipples are no-nos,

for they show the breasts to be active and independent zones of sensitivity and eroticism” (84). Nipples are deliberately obscured in the “best breast” ideal so as to legitimate the cultural function of breasts in heterosexual male fetishizing and not, as Young rightly points out, as an integral part of female sexuality. Nipples are “no-nos” because they fracture the cultural construction of breasts as masculinized sexual commodity for the heterosexual male gaze. Yet, this scarceness of nipples makes them valuable and desirable. The visibility of nipples in “Nipple Man” suggests that the era in which the story is set is during or shortly after the most recent wave of Western women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, when according to Yalom women’s “bralessness symbolized freedom and rebellion” (243) and nipples were more easily discerned. Just as the “packaging of breasts as sexual objects had been the norm in the forties and fifties” (Yalom 243), twenty-first century Western women are now again being sold on wearing bras that conceal their nipples, what Germaine Greer refers to as “the fantasy of pneumatic boobs” (24). The term “coverage,” ubiquitous with bra manufacturers today, conveys the lengths marketers and retailers are willing to go in concealing nipples through gel padding, layering, and lining of fabric with removable cups in order, as a Lululemon advertisement suggests, to “keep our ladies [breasts] on lockdown” (“Booby Bracer”). To hide nipples from view, and thus deny breasts as active agents of a woman’s sexual self and as purveyors of nutrition for babies, creates the conditions for the hetero-male, such as John, to appreciate breasts for his pleasure only.

Burnard demonstrates the problematic nature of breast commodification in the description of John’s womanizing of his students: “Some had returned to his office boasting degrees better than his own and two had come back to show off babes in arms and fuller hips and breasts relaxed into a new purpose. Given the chance, he would have carefully set the infants on the floor beside his filing cabinets to nap inside their downy sleepers while he jumped their still

familiar mothers” (134). Such thoughts convey John as a character fixated on women as vessels for his sexual pleasure. While John is aware of these new mothers’ maternal bodies, with “fuller hips and breasts relaxed into a new purpose,” the women remain sex objects worthy of being “jumped.” Their breasts serve a biological function, but John still understands the breasts as objects of consumption to feed his sexuality. While Burnard presents a fairly shallow characterization of John in this passage, she does so with the purpose of exposing a surprising response to the post-surgical mastectomized body of the woman he eventually falls in love with: Marion, a fellow faculty member whose books he helps carry when he finds her in physical distress on the library steps. Referring to her as “Maid Marion” (135) solidifies John’s character as adhering to antiquated social mores, while his thoughts return to nipples when he and Marion share a lunch a few months after his turn as knight in shining armour. During their lunch, he again falls into nipple ruminations as he stares at Marion’s chest: “Her breasts seemed full and solid although he couldn’t begin to find her nipples; they were lost beneath the swirling blue paisley. . . . He was going to get into her pants and he was going to fall in love, in whichever order was necessary. She could decide the order” (137). John understands Marion’s breasts as seemingly “full and solid,” while the nipples remain indiscernible. Marion’s adherence to the Western culture’s breasted ideal (readers learn later in the story that she uses prosthetics) aids the post-surgical body to maintain an illusion of best breast for the benefit of the male gaze. This illusion of best breast allows both the female and the male to express a sexuality that falls within the confines of a clearly defined social script for heterosexual couples. As these characters demonstrate, the female performs femininity by way of breasts (in this case, prostheses) and the male ogles and objectifies them, without knowing that they are prostheses, as way of projecting

his hetero-masculinity. But when the illusion of best breast is erased by the reality of Marion's chest as a "war zone" (140), entrenched sexual scripts are challenged and modified.

In *Quill and Quire*, Kathleen Byrne describes Burnard's female characters from *Casino and Other Stories* as "a little resigned, may be [*sic*] ever-so-slightly battered by life, but for the most part . . . wise" (22). Marion certainly fits this description. In contrast to the other women that John so casually falls into bed with, Marion is not so easily romanced out of her clothes: "He expected by this time, quite honourably, he thought, to be into her pants. She was friendly almost beyond bearing, she touched his arm or his back whenever there was even the mildest excuse to do so. But she'd said no twice to his offer to tuck her up and she kissed him chastely" (Burnard 138-39). While John perhaps wrongly interprets Marion's touching his arms and back as a definitive signal of her sexual interest in him, he is unable to bear the sexual frustration any longer. He pointedly asks Marion over dinner why they have not made love (139) in the hopes of discerning what he believes must be some sort of sexual hang-up on her part, without of course an exploration of his own fetish as possible factor. During the car ride home, John demonstrates his own body transgressions, as he places Marion's hand on his pot belly and prominently displays the varicose vein on his leg in the hopes that Marion will be less insecure about her own body, and thus more likely to consent to a sexual act (139). John does not know that her insecurities in approximating the body ideal are genuine enough to warrant the wearing of prostheses to replicate as closely as possible culturally sanctioned breasts. In fact, her performance of best breast through prostheses requires Marion to avoid a sexual relationship with John; doing so would reveal the reality of her transgressive post-surgical body, a reality that she believes will leave John and herself without a culturally designated way to perform their sexuality.

After John's attempt at putting Marion at ease in regard to possible deviations from the ideal body, Marion responds by pulling up her skirt to expose her thighs, which leaves John so aroused that he races home in the car "sticking to the passing lane" (140). Before they have a chance to get home, Marion hijacks John's plans by exposing her illusion of best-breast and the reality of her post-surgical body. The narrator describes, through John's eyes, Marion's authentic body:

Her lacy black bra was filled with something other than flesh, something similar in texture and shape to the kids' old beanbags. She reached around and unhooked her bra, letting it fall heavily into her lap. He was looking at a war zone. . . . As soon as his hands were free he turned and used them to cover the two nearly healed slices. His thumbs moved involuntarily, up and down, up and down, over the rough dark texture. (140)

This passage displays the transgressive nature of the mastectomized chest, for without the prostheses, the illusion is replaced with the reality of what John conceptualizes as a place of war. Because the breasts have been excised from Marion's chest, John is unable to fetishize them, and therefore attempts to understand this challenging reality using war terminology that conceptualizes the signifiers of womanliness (Young 76) via violence and destruction historically carried out by men. By identifying the female chest as a "war zone," John can still interpret the breast through the male gaze. However, in moving his thumbs "up and down" repeatedly, John enacts sexual performance in a non-traditional fashion. His thumbs move in an almost involuntary fashion, hinting at an almost perverse fascination with Marion's transgressive chest. Marion responds with a smile that is "empty, and raw" (140), suggesting that John's actions have done little to provoke a sexual response in her.

Marion's wearing of prostheses and ultimate revelation of the double mastectomy imply that the performance of femininity, let alone sexuality, is encapsulated within a woman's breasts, or prostheses that take the place of breasts. In her research on the post-surgical body, Crompvoets determines that, as Marion experiences, the use of prosthetics by women who have experienced breast loss achieves in an illusory fashion the best breast ideal, but in reality solidifies their post-surgical selves as lacking. Crompvoets argues that the prosthesis is

a nexus between body and self, performing the 'whole woman' when it is worn.

However, enacting this 'complete' self in everyday practices reveals that this nexus is unstable. . . . Rather than enabling recovery prostheses hinder the process as they act as a constant reminder of the realities of the post-surgical body. Thus as women position their prosthesis in their bra . . . they perform their post-surgical body as incomplete and abnormal. (147)

The prosthesis functions as illusory tool to project the best breast ideal, while emphasizing the post-surgical body as transgressive. How then to perform one's sexuality, and in turn, respond sexually without the breasts to arouse and to signify arousal? Burnard answers this question with an empathetic exchange between John and Marion, who transfer the site of sexual pleasure to Marion's thighs.

Burnard ends "Nipple Man" on a note of possibility, with John still attempting to persuade Marion into a sexually intimate act. After rubbing his hands across her mastectomy scars, John professes to imagine her breasts: "'They're in my mind,' he said. He rubbed his cheek against her. 'I've got them.' He bent down to her thigh, sank his teeth, gently. He took her firm and shapely flesh between his teeth. He could hear the sharp intake of her breath above him and then a sound that might have been laughter, if laughter is sometimes brutal" (141). Using

Young's argument of the breast as fetishized object, John transfers the qualities of the ideal breast—the look and feel of firmness—onto another of Marion's body parts: her thighs. In capturing the illusion of the breasts, evident in his declaration that "They're in my mind," John's actions and words further suggest the new possibilities for sexual satisfaction evident in his transference of his desire for the absent breasts to her thigh. However, Marion's sharp intake of breath and "brutal" laughter is ambiguous. Is this noise an expression of unexpected pleasure, or of cynicism at John's attempt to transfer the site of sexual arousal, or does it indicate fear about her own ability to transfer the site of her sexuality away from her breasts and nipples? The self-professed "Nipple Man" seems capable of creating or altering the heterosexual script, while Marion's laughter proposes a bevy of possible meanings. Nevertheless, Burnard's short story exposes how the transgressive post-surgical body, after the illusion of best breast is dropped, has the potential to be a site of new sexual possibilities as demonstrated by John's capacity to cast off the limiting heterosexual script of breast fetish. The message Bernard seems to imply at story's end is the possibility of bodily pleasure post-mastectomy for both partners, even a self-professed nipple man, suggesting that the breast is not the be all and end all of male arousal and female sexuality. Disconcertingly, though, "Nipple Man" has earlier posited breasts—whether present or imagined—as very much positioned for the consumption, fetishization, and sexual pleasure of the male partner in heterosexual couplings.

Like Burnard in "Nipple Man," Carol Shields plays in "Eros" with conceptions of the breast as object of consumption and toy for male pleasure, as well as exploring the realities of the cancerous breast. In a review of Shields's *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, John Bemrose refers to "Eros" as the "collection's finest story" (66), because it embraces "life's tragedy and transience" (66). Telling the story of Ann, a middle-aged divorced woman who has recently undergone a



mastectomy as a result of breast cancer, Shields's third-person limited narrator ruminates over Ann's past breasted self as she sits with various couples at a friend's dinner table over a meal. Like the experiences of Carol in "Nipple Man," these remembrances signal the breast as object for male consumption and pleasure. The representation of the reaction of Ann's husband, Benjamin, during their early married life is especially telling:

Ann married Benjamin. She had both her breasts in those days, and Benjamin adored those breasts. "You'd think they'd squeak when the nipple goes up," he said with wonder. He toyed with them, sucked them, gnawed gently at the tender breast skin, saying, "Grrrrr." The brown colour of the twin aureoles astonished him, though. He had expected pink, like in a painting. Ann wondered if the brownness frightened him slightly. (215-16)

Ann's breasts seem to be little more than a chew toy for a male animal's sexual gratification, as Benjamin has expected the nipple to "squeak" while he "toyed" and "gnawed" and while growling like an animal. Benjamin's astonishment in regards to the nipple colour is also significant, since the darker shade does not align with cultural representations of the nipple of a young, childless, EuroCanadian woman. And while Benjamin toys with Ann's breasts, Ann herself is not aroused, but instead focuses on her partner's attention to her chest. This passage makes clear that for Ann and Benjamin the female breast—one which is compared to the cultural script of best breast—is designed for a man's pleasure.

This cultural script is particular about breast shape, size and colour, as Young makes clear: "What matters is the look of them, how they measure up before the normalizing gaze. There is one perfect shape and proportion for breasts: round, sitting high on the chest, large but not bulbous, with the look of firmness" (79). As Benjamin's play with Ann's breasts

demonstrates, when the breast does not align with this “perfect shape and proportion,” both partners in a heterosexual coupling are left to question the divergence. In *A History of the Breast*, feminist scholar and historian Marilyn Yalom details the oftentimes contradictory symbolism and meaning of breasts throughout human history and in so doing makes an astute point regarding the consequences and implications of embodying a transgressive chest. Yalom states that “[s]ince most breasts do not correspond to the commercially popular globe but are shaped like a teardrop, flatter on top and droopy below, many women suffer from an inaccurate portrayal of their bodies” (271). Both Carol’s “plain as plain can be” nipples and Ann’s “brown colour of the twin aureoles” suggest that neither Burnard nor Shields reiterate the best breast of today’s “commercially popular globe” in the physicality of their female characters. Instead, the breast descriptions emphasize the characters’ physical non-adherence to socially constructed ideal breasts. Ann’s breasts transgress even before they are excised from her body, eventually performing the ultimate transgression with their absence.

Just as John’s first wife in Burnard’s “Nipple Man” is at the receiving end of an inappropriate sexual request, so too is Shields’s character Ann in “Eros.” As Ann contemplates the discussion around her friend’s dinner table regarding the awakening of the sexual self, she suddenly becomes complicit in an inappropriate sexual act. The hosts have purposely assigned the seat next to Ann to Alex, a bachelor, as part of “the well-intentioned matchmaking of her coupled friends” (206). As Alex espouses his thoughts on sexuality, “its secret nature and hidden surprises . . . he covered Ann’s hand with his own, and then with one slow, almost absent-minded gesture he swept her hand into the shadows of his lap. She could feel the rough linen of the table napkin, then the abrupt soft corduroy of his trousers” (208). Alex’s actions seem intended to prove his theory of the sometimes clandestine and surprising nature of human

sexuality. His actions further suggest the power structures inherent within masculine sexual scripts in Western culture; placing a woman's hand over his genitals establishes the freedom of a man's sexual expression, regardless of its innate impropriety and violence.

Nevertheless, Ann's reaction to Alex's overtly sexually aggressive act complicates the possibilities of the heterosexual script: "She flexed her fingers, an involuntary movement, and a moment later found her hand resting against human flesh, the testicles laughably loose in their envelope of fine skin, and a penis, flaccid and small, curled up like a blind animal. Meat and two veg was how she and her girlfriends once described this part of the male body" (208-09). Both the narrator's and Ann's descriptions of Alex's genitals diverge markedly from traditional representations of masculine sexuality as powerful and invariably ready for sexual gratification (with or without the assistance of prescribed medication). Undercutting descriptors are used to communicate the appearance of the genitals: the testicles are "laughably loose" and the penis is "flaccid and small" and described as powerless through the simile "curled up like a blind animal" as well as the food metaphor of "meat and two veg." This passage suggests the fallibility of male sexuality; the phallus, like the breast, is limited to a very narrow sexual script and, if flaccid, cannot be interpreted as representing sexual power.

In her research on our culture's vulnerability to the idealized westernized body, Orbach argues that the penis has been mythologized to the detriment of male sexuality: "The unpredictability of the penis and the need to represent it as ever hard, ever available and ever in pursuit have created a mythological magical phallus which allows us to forget how devastating the effect of the labile nature of the penis can be on men's self-experience and masculine sensibility" (*Bodies* 152). The mythological phallus that is ever ready for a sexual encounter, like the "high, hard, and pointy" best breast ideal (Young 77), is an illusory phenomenon that has

been normalized and idealized within our culture. To expose the penis as deviating from or transgressing the sexual script allows Shields to question the limiting nature of the male sexual experience.

Ann's reaction, her unconscious flexing of her fingers to rest atop Alex's genitals, suggests that perhaps Ann is a willing participant in this sexual exchange. As the narrator notes, Ann does realize the precariousness of the situation: "At first she thought she might laugh, and then she decided she might faint. She had never fainted in all her life, but this could be the moment. No one would blame her, especially those who knew about her recent surgery and chemo treatments" (209). This passage is the first instance in which the reporting of Ann's thoughts reveals that she is undergoing treatment for cancer. It remains unclear at this point in the narrative whether the treatment is breast cancer, and if so, whether she has undergone a lumpectomy, a single/double mastectomy, or reconstructive surgery, or is using a prosthesis or prostheses.

Ann responds to Alex's forceful insistence that she keep her hand on his genitals in an unexpected way: "She made a motion to pull her hand away from Alex's lap, but he pressed his fingers more firmly on hers. . . . Her consciousness seemed to divide and to divide again, and then soften. She moved her fingers slightly, playfully, seeing what experiments she might invent" (209). Alex's forcefulness followed by Ann's seemingly unconscious decision to "play" with Alex's penis is a peculiar turn of events. Is this an unwanted sexual encounter for Ann's character, or not? Ann tries to pull her hand away from Alex's lap, signifying a rebuke of this unwanted sexual attention. But this attempt only fuels Alex's insistence, followed by Ann's acquiescence and playful manipulation of his penis. Leaving aside the power implications of Alex's actions, this sexual interaction under the table suggests that Ann post-surgery is still a

sexual being who draws sexual attention from others, albeit hidden under the table and with others present. However, the penis is flaccid when Ann first puts her hand on Alex's lap and the reader never learns if her "experiments" render the penis erect or not. Regardless of Alex's sexual response, or lack thereof, his initial placing of her hand and secondary insistence that she keep her hand in his lap implies his sexual interest in Ann and implies the aggressiveness of male sexual power relations; her post-surgical chest is a non-issue. Alex's sexual interest in Ann is focused on her ability to pleasure him through her hand and fingers and does not rest on her adherence to or disobedience of the breast ideal, suggesting that hetero-male sexual arousal does not rest squarely on the breast but instead on domination and at the same time delusion about the nature of the female body and sexuality.

As Yalom indicates in her history of the breast, most breasts, like Ann's, cannot live up to the culturally scripted globe. Moreover, Yalom believes that breasts signify a spectrum of meaning, from givers of life and sustenance to the roots of death because breasts are ever more associated with cancer: "For women, their breasts literally incarnate the existential tension between Eros and Thanatos—life and death—in a visible and palpable form" (8). Eros, the Greek mythological god of love and sexuality, in comparison to Thanatos, the personification of death, is an apt contrast, considering that Shields's short story is entitled "Eros." However, such double-sided personification is absent within our culture's sexual script when the nipple is absent (denying the female her own erogenous pleasure) and when the post-surgical chest projects a best-breast illusion; the breast as signifier of life and death is trumped in the all-consuming quest to commodify and idealize breasts. As Crompton makes clear, the post-surgical mastectomized chest is expected to be transient, is abnormal until it realigns with the breasted cultural script (4). Breasts may incarnate life and death, as Yalom states, but short stories by writers such as Shields

and Burnard pronounce the undeniable necessity of breasts as markers of femininity for heterosexual sexual consumption.

As Shields's story unfolds, the focus turns to Ann's remembrances of her childhood romantic and sexual awakening: at age four, visiting a married cousin; at age nine, witnessing an aunt and uncle kiss; as a teenager, reading love sonnets and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Such events mark the stages of sexual awareness for Ann, but the greatest significance is placed on her sexual relationship with her former husband, Benjamin. Now her post-surgical self frets over her transgressive chest, not in considering possibilities for her own pleasure, but again taking into account masculine perceptions of the best breast ideal:

Ann knows that he [Benjamin] would not find her beautiful at this moment, with her battleground of a chest, that slicing breast scar and the curious new cords of hard tissue that join her shoulder and arm. Alex, sitting next to her at a dinner table with her thumb and forefinger on his penis, will not find it beautiful either, never mind the cheerful advice from the cancer booklets about the return of the libido and new forms of touching and holding. (217)

Shields's narrator, adapting Ann's consciousness, uses the war metaphor "battleground" in describing her mastectomized chest, similar to the way the term "war zone" is used by Burnard's narrator in "Nipple Man" to represent Marion's torso. The language of warfare is thus evident in the rhetoric of cancer treatment and results. Sontag notes that "every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology" (64) which explains why both male and female characters turn to war rhetoric.

The post-surgical Ann is quite aware that her body cannot achieve the best breast ideal, and she is resigned to a fate of sexually disappointing her male partners. Her sense of self as a

sexual being, able to produce arousal in others, is in turmoil. As Young makes clear, mastectomy alters not only a person's physical being but also her sense of self: "That breast loss is a trauma should come as no surprise. . . . [F]or many, if not most, women, breasts are an important aspect of identity. While their feelings about their breasts often have been multiple and ambivalent, nevertheless they are a central element in their bodily self-image" (93-94). Ann's post-surgical corporeality and consequent non-adherence to the breast ideal provokes a sense of body dis-ease. So attuned to the ideal is Ann that she seems incapable of believing in her post-surgical self as feminine and as capable of provoking a sexual response in others. Her transgressive chest weighs so heavily on her consciousness that she does not see the fallacy of her own argument, as Alex's actions and her own reactions underneath the dinner table prove that the sexual spark is still possible. However, this sexuality, like that of John's in Burnard's story, is possible only with an act of imagination, since Alex may be imagining Ann's breasts as intact.

While both stories demonstrate that new forms of sexual arousal are possible, what remains problematic is the ambiguous post-surgery sexual response experienced by Marion in "Nipple Man" and by Ann in "Eros," with each story ending inconclusively. Both of these characters seem hesitant to experience their own *jouissance*, preferring instead to focus on the perceived masculine gaze and masculine sexual response. Admittedly, Ann's character is seated at a dinner party, which would hamper anyone's ability to display sexual pleasure. There is in fact one account of Ann achieving sexual pleasure, detailed in a remembrance of a trip with her then-husband in Paris. While relaxing in their hotel room early on a Sunday morning, Ann reading *Le Monde* as Benjamin rests on the bed, they hear church bells and street noise from outside their hotel: "Then she heard something else: a woman's strong orgasmic cry coming from one of the open windows of the hotel. . . . Benjamin's eyes were suddenly open. He was

smiling at her, and she was smiling back. Then they were out of their clothes—this happened in an instant—and into each other’s arms” (219). And while the “rhythm of their bodies took them over, in tune for once” (119), the sexual act does not mend their broken relationship. However, the desire that she felt and that Benjamin felt for her is a reminder of her femininity and sexuality as, in the last lines of the story, she is described as hanging on “to the moment in these difficult days, even at this dinner table with her hand still in the lap of a man named Alex, whom she hardly knows or even likes. She is part of the blissful, awakened world, at least for a moment. What comes in the next hour or the next year scarcely matters” (220). Ann clings to this memory as proof that she was a sexual being before surgery and can therefore be a sexual being after it. The masculine response to both the pre-surgical and post-surgical body—Benjamin’s arousal while “toying” with Ann’s non-ideal breasts as well as Alex’s insistence that Ann pleasure him with her hand—can be interpreted as a positive response by Ann’s partners. While Ann worries about how her breasts deviate from the ideal, her actions demonstrate that the sexual self has not been excised along with her breast. Her sexual self, sparked “at least for a moment,” suggests that Ann’s femininity, sexuality, and ability to arouse the sexual interest of others, is inherent in more than just her breasts.

While “Nipple Man” can be read as challenging the male heterosexual script of breast fetish, and “Eros” as casting off engrained concepts of erotic signifiers, Svendsen’s “White Shoulders” takes a much darker look at sexuality, both pre- and post-mastectomy. This short story, the last in the short story cycle *Marine Life*, describes the character of Adele and her fractious relationship with her older sister, Irene, as Irene undergoes a mastectomy to remove a cancerous breast. Using a first-person narrative, Svendsen uses Adele as reporter of Irene’s experiences, as well as the responses of Irene’s husband Peter and the development of the



perverse sexual triangle with their daughter, Jill. As Adele spends more time with Irene and her family, she comes to realize that Jill is being molested by her father. Adele awakens to this horrifying conclusion as she slowly pieces the evidence together as it is reported to the reader. From the beginning of the narrative, Adele discloses that Irene naively believes that her illness will not affect her family life: “She [Irene] wanted everything to proceed as normally as possible” (146). Noticeable from the very outset of the story, Irene’s breast cancer has remarkably transformed the family dynamic, having apparently acted as catalyst for the sexual abuse of Jill. Irene may not “intend to allow her illness to interfere with their life” (146), but as the narrative reveals, Irene can control neither her own transgressive body nor her husband’s much more clearly transgressive reactions.

Although “Nipple Man” and “Eros” focus squarely on the sexual dynamics of couples, Svendsen’s story highlights the trauma of breast loss as experienced not just by the woman or couple alone, but also by the immediate and extended family that surrounds her. And while such an experience can engender an environment of support and encouragement, as it does between Marion and John in Burnard’s “Nipple Man,” it can also provoke the very worst of responses, as depicted in Svendsen’s “White Shoulders.” As Janice Fiamengo argues in her essay on Svendsen’s *Marine Life* collection, the daughter in the story performs the signs of the perverse reaction of her father to the pre- and post-surgical corporeality of her mother. Fiamengo states that “Jill’s actions and responses become signs to be deciphered, semaphores of distress” (12). Jill has changed from a well-adjusted and well-rounded teenager, “taking classes in the high dive, water ballet, drawing, and drama, and boy-hunting in the mall on Saturdays with a posse of dizzy friends” (146), to a girl who is “unathletic, withdrawn, and bookish” (146), as well as “shy” and “unsure” (149), not to mention exhibiting furtive eating and consequent weight gain.

As Bordo writes in *Unbearable Weight*, women seek solace via eating: “For women, the emotional comfort of self-feeding is rarely turned to in a state of pleasure and independence, but in despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation” (126). Jill’s furtive binge eating (Kraft Dinner straight out of the pot locked away in a basement bathroom) and her clothing (baggy sweat shirts and pants that hide her shape) together provide clear evidence of her corporeal response to her father’s sexual abuse (154-56). This response is an attempt to make her body asexual and therefore less appealing sexually, in order to end her father’s molestation.

The collection in which “White Shoulders” was published is described by Dayv James-French, in a review for *Books in Canada*, as stories “linked through the voice of Adele” but “with a remarkable sensitivity to the limits of Adele’s awareness” (45-46). Adele’s limited understanding allows for a slow awakening to the abuse occurring in her sister’s home. Her first description of interaction between father and daughter occurs while Irene rests in bed days before her scheduled mastectomy. Reading for the semaphores, the underlying inappropriateness of Peter towards his daughter becomes evident. As Peter sits down on his wife’s bed next to Jill, he lifts his shirt and demands that she scratch his back. Jill softly attempts to deny her father’s request, yet Peter demands satisfaction, declaring gruffly “‘you’re my daughter. . . . And I have an itch.’ Peter looked at Irene and she gave Jill a sharp nudge. ‘Do your poor dad,’ she said. ‘You don’t even have to get up’” (149). While this exchange is not evidence of Peter’s sexual abuse of his daughter, it cements early in the narrative a worrisome dynamic of the daughter as physical stand-in for the mother in the eyes of the father, and I would add, a troubling resignation of the mother to this fact. The exchange also demonstrates a father who feels he can exercise power over his wife and daughter any way he chooses.

Adele reports that Irene is no longer the same woman after her cancer diagnosis. For instance, when Adele first greets her sister, she is struck by Irene's drawn physicality: "A wan version of my sister rested on a water bed in the dark. . . . She slept here alone. She didn't frolic with Peter anymore, have sex" (148). Adele deciphers from the clothes hanging in the closet that Irene has made the spare bedroom her personal room. While both Burnard and Shields depict male characters as capable of experiencing a sexual spark in the absence of breasts, Svendsen represents the male partner as unable or unwilling to deal with even the possibility that breast loss does not preclude sexuality. Adele notes the way that Irene reveals reaction to her cancer diagnosis in terms of her husband's feelings, and not her own: "She told me she was scared. Not for herself, but for Peter. That when she had first explained to him about the cancer, he hadn't spoken to her for three weeks. Or touched her. Or kissed her. He'd slept in the guestroom, until she'd offered to move there. And he'd been after Jill to butter his toast, change the sheets, iron his pants" (152). Peter deals with the cancer by distancing himself from his wife physically, emotionally and sexually, and by placing his daughter in her stead. While in Burnard's "Nipple Man," John is almost instantly able to navigate Marion's mastectomy revelation and transfer the site of sexual arousal, Svendsen's heterosexual male character all but shuts down his relationship with his wife. Instead, Peter transfers his needs to his daughter; Jill becomes the surrogate wife to her father, performing household duties that were executed by Irene pre-diagnosis, including, Adele eventually surmises, the role of sexual partner. Throughout her visit, Adele begins to suspect the abusive incestuous nature of the father-daughter relationship, but it is not until she returns home and receives Jill's poems in the mail that Adele's suspicions are confirmed. The ending of one of the poems makes the abuse and Jill's sense of powerlessness quite clear: "And then her earthly father appears in her bed and, 'He makes night / Come again / All night,' by

covering her eyes with his large, heavy hand” (161). We learn at narrative’s end that Jill escapes the sexual abuse she experiences by committing suicide by throwing herself off a bridge. Such an ending suggests the dangers of unhealthy sexual expression or repression not just to the female experiencing breast loss, but also to her partner and other family members; transferring the site of sexual excitement can be a healthy response to breast loss, as “Nipple Man” shows, but “White Shoulders” demonstrates that transference to a surrogate (in this case, a daughter) proves to be the undoing of these characters.

Even pre-surgery, once she learns of her diseased breast Irene seems reconciled to performing her future bodily experience in an asexual way, “like a middle-aged matron” (148). Her husband’s response, however, is to turn to self-directed sexual expression. While Ann in “Eros” is thrust into an unwanted sexual exchange that exposes the labile nature of the penis, Adele experiences the awkwardness of an unexpected and unwanted encounter with the male sexual appendage during the visit with her sister’s family before the mastectomy. Adele makes her way from room to room in her sister’s house looking for her niece, but instead comes across “the master bedroom, Peter’s domain. I did a double-take; he was there. Naked, lying on top of the bed, his still hand holding his penis—as if to keep it warm and safe—the head shining” (154). In keeping his penis “warm and safe,” perhaps by masturbating, Peter solidifies his understanding of the link between the mythological magical phallus and the “high, hard, and pointy” (Young 77) best breast ideal. While his wife is preparing to have a breast excised from her chest, Peter comforts and protects his appendage and himself; this is Peter’s way of safeguarding his sexual self. In holding the signifier of male virility, he affirms his sexuality in the face of the impending loss of what he interprets as the sexual signifier in his wife. Both members of this couple are prepared to accept Irene as a single-breasted woman as asexual.

This story's linkage of the breasted self with femininity and the breast as primary signifier of sexual arousal further solidifies the importance, or perhaps even imperative, of regaining illusory breasts post-mastectomy. As Cromptvoets argues, this regaining of the ideal chest, or portraying such an illusion through prosthetics, is related to overall health and well-being:

As women attempt to come to grips with the changed landscape of their mastectomized body and the challenges a breast cancer crisis has brought to their sense of self, they are simultaneously faced with powerful social discourses which situate their body as incomplete, abnormal and unfeminine without two breasts. Furthermore, the restoration of their health and well-being is positioned as intricately linked to regaining their pre-surgery appearance. (3)

The transgressive chest, minus a breast or two, is not seen as the end result of cancer in contemporary Western culture. Instead, many women see the last steps of breast reconstruction or the wearing of prosthetics as imperative to regaining a place in the "kingdom of the well" (Sontag 3). In all three of the short stories under analysis, only in "White Shoulders" is there a brief reflection of the importance of approximating best breasts post-surgery by the woman herself.

The pre-surgical Irene already performed herself as asexual and was understood as such by her husband. However, the post-surgical Irene seems happy to approximate the best breast ideal through a prosthesis. Ten days after undergoing surgery to remove her cancerous breast, Irene returns home, and Adele notes, "started cracking jokes about her future prosthetic fitting. 'How about the Dolly Parton, hon?' she said to Peter. 'Then I'd be a handful'" (156). While a woman's post-surgical self displays its transgressiveness through the absent breast, Irene's

joking about the possible prosthetic stand-in indicates her resiliency in the face of cancer, but also her acute understanding of the importance of gaining the illusion of ideal breasts, even if that ideal mimics a parodic femininity such as that of Dolly Parton, whose ample breasts have become a cultural symbol of the artificiality of the ideal bosom. Like Cromptvoets, Young argues that the prosthesis replicates the phallicized breast:

[W]hen she has lost her breast, the culture's message is clear and unambiguous: She must adjust by learning to hide her deformity. Above all, she must return to daily life looking and behaving as though nothing has happened. She replaces her breast with a prosthesis, which finally achieves the objectified attributes of the phallicized breast: it is firm, does not jiggle, points just right (except when it slips), and usually has no nipple. (94)

Like Marion from Burnard's "Nipple Man," Irene plans to approximate the best breast ideal by way of a prosthetic. In their attempts to hide their transgressive chests, both Irene and Marion literally embody the overwhelming powerful cultural message that breasts signify femininity and provoke a sexual response in both partners in a heterosexual coupling. However, as evidenced with Marion and John, when the ruse is dropped, other sexual signifiers are possible. Furthermore, Ann in Shields's "Eros" still exudes a sexual spark post-surgery, proving that the sexual self and arousal do not rest in total on the phallicized breast.

However, in Svendsen's story, the sexual relationship between Irene and Peter is confounded by the breast cancer diagnosis and further stymied by the mastectomy. In the exchange between Irene and Peter, Adele witnesses first hand Peter's affirmation that a woman is asexual without breasts, as well as Jill's mute reaction to this affirmation while she physically distances herself from her father:

I was surprised to see Peter envelop [Irene] in his arm; I hadn't ever seen him offer an affectionate gesture. He told her he didn't care what size boob she bought, because breasts were for the hungry babies—not so much for the husband. 'I have these,' he said. 'These are mine. These big white shoulders.' And he rested his head against her shoulder and looked placidly at Jill; he was heavy, but Irene used her other arm to bolster herself, hold him up, and she closed her eyes in what seemed to be joy. Jill came and sat by me. (156)

This scene demonstrates Peter's understanding of his wife as a mother-like figure and no longer as his sexual partner. In declaring breasts for hungry babies, Peter disavows the sexuality of his wife and affirms the importance of her shoulders; here the shoulders become the physical markers of Irene's asexuality. Curiously, Irene seems to joyfully accept this asexual role of mothering her husband. Her behaviour even displays her nurturant position vis-a-vis her husband. Young defines this position as "that of the self-sacrificing listener and stroker, the one who turns toward the wounded, needful ego that uses her as mirror and enclosing womb, giving nothing to her, and she of course is polite enough not to ask" (90). Irene's white shoulders, both literally and metaphorically holding Peter up, signify her post-surgical self as motherly nurturer. After turning his wife's transgressive single-breasted body into a sign of asexuality, Peter turns his sexual attention to the surrogate, with Jill physically distancing herself from her father and this role he wants her to fill.

One of the more troublesome interactions related in this short story occurs when Irene, a few days after returning home from the hospital, attends a concert at Jill's school and bleeds through the dressing on her chest. The one-sided exchange that follows demonstrates Peter's complicated and perverse responses to his wife's post-surgical body: "On the tear to the hospital,

Peter said he'd sue Irene's stupid 'Paki bugger' doctor. He also said he should take his stupid wife to court for loss of sex. He should get a divorce for no-nookie. For supporting a one-tit wonder. And on and on" (157). This disturbing tirade crystallizes Peter's inability to see past the single-breasted chest as anything other than sexually unappealing and something to be wholeheartedly rejected. Peter's language leaves little possibility or hope of bodily pleasure post-surgery for either partner because of his inability to get past his single-minded conception of breasts as signifiers of sexuality for his arousal and pleasure. As Cromptvoets argues, many post-surgical breast cancer survivors have difficulty coming to terms with our culture's discourse of breasts as signifiers of femininity: "Tension between a previously 'whole' self and a new, altered self emerges when faced with discourse that projects identity as strongly connected with the essence of womanhood (that essence being a femininity defined by breasts)" (19). Thus, in listening to her husband's mean-spirited discourse that denounces the single-breasted woman as lacking the ability to provoke a sexual spark, Irene must come to terms with her altered corporeality as transgressively asexual. While Ann from "Eros" is able to cling to a past memory as proof of the possibility for a sexual self post-mastectomy, Svendsen's character cannot; understood as asexual even pre-surgery, Irene has no sexual touchstone to cling to. This predicament is only made worse by her husband's persistently belligerent attitude towards his wife's body and even worse still by his abusive relationship with their daughter. No matter Jill's struggle to make her appearance asexual, "glasses, no makeup, jeans with an oversize Kelly-green sweatshirt, and many extra pounds" (149), nothing ends the sexual abuse until she takes her own life.

These three short stories provide intriguing confirmation that the best breast ideal—in other words, the phallicized breast—is mythical and illusory. Neither pre- nor post-surgical



female bodies in these stories are able to replicate this ideal, marking the corporeality of the female characters as transgressive. Such transgressions can and do upset typical notions of the sexual self, creating an opportunity for the women characters and their partners to transfer the sexual site of arousal in a positive fashion, as Marion and John do in “Nipple Man,” or in a harmful way, as Peter does in “White Shoulders.” Burnard, Shields, and Svendsen provide compelling fictional explorations of mastectomized post-surgical bodies. By investigating how women characters respond both to the mastectomized chest, and to social pressures to adhere to the best breast standard through the use of prosthetics or reconstructive surgery, these authors demonstrate that breasts are intrinsic to women’s sense of self, but need not be their only avenue to performing femininity or sexual power. Moreover, if a self-professed “Nipple Man” can, at the story’s end, see beyond the breast and offer up alternatives for sexual arousal, and if Alex in “Eros” can sense Ann’s sexual spark even post-surgery, then both femininity and sexuality can be flexible and in a continual state of flux. Unlike as supposed by Peter in “White Shoulders,” a woman’s post-surgical body may be changed, but is not abnormal or asexual (Cromptvoets 148). These stories suggest that breasts are infinitely more than a sexual commodity for the heterosexual masculine gaze and arousal, and more importantly, prove unnecessary to sexual fulfillment. What remains problematic, however, is the notion put forward by and sometimes challenged in these stories that post-mastectomy bodies are transient, are somehow incomplete, and are unfeminine. These stories describe how female characters navigate “the kingdom of the ill” and find themselves migrating back to the “kingdom of the well” (Sontag 3), most often through the support of loved ones regardless of how well their post-surgical bodies replicate the ideal breasts. In the end, the performance of power is achieved by the female characters in both

“Nipple Man” and “Eros,” but is limited by the level of comfort with their post-mastectomized bodies.

### Chapter 3

#### “I Only Throw Up Dinners”: The Anorectic and Bulimic Stance as Parody in Margaret Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs” and Madeleine Thien’s “Alchemy”

In previous chapters, transgressive female corporeality in Canadian short stories—exhibited by way of benign tumour, blood clot, and mastectomized breasts—proves a catalyst for greater flexibility in the female characters’ performance of gender and social power. Continuing this course of inquiry, I turn the focus in this chapter to the female body in its entirety, exploring problematic experiences with weight preoccupation, eating distress, and disorders, in relationship with dominant Western ideals of what psychoanalyst Susie Orbach calls the female “body beautiful” which entails a “slim aesthetic . . . and ample breasts” (*Bodies* 3) and of femininity performed in accordance with societal expectations. Comparing Margaret Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs” to Madeleine Thien’s “Alchemy,” I explore similar narrative tactics in their commentary on eating distress: a reportage style in which the main character or focalizer witnesses the destructiveness of eating disorders as they manifest themselves in the female characters around them. While Atwood’s short story explores the female quest for thinness as all-encompassing cultural phenomena, and Thien explores this quest as physical expression and response to sexual abuse, both authors posit eating distress and its repercussions on the body as painful and ultimately unsuccessful. Taking an ideal body image to a parodic extreme proves unhelpful in ending the sexual abuse in Thien’s “Alchemy,” nor does it bode well for the various self-starving females in Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs.” I argue that weight preoccupation and eating distress—exhibited through the anorectic<sup>16</sup> and bulimic behaviour of Atwood and

---

<sup>16</sup> Following some preferred usages of “anorexic” as noun and “anorectic” as adjective, I use the term “anorectic” to describe the behaviours of characters who experience anorexia.

Thien's female characters—fashion not the ideal body beautiful, but instead a misfit body, one that transgresses as a parodic extreme. While this parody apparently conforms to the cultural ideal of the female body beautiful as thin, it also transgresses in its severe exaggeration, and thus highlights the paradox inherent within the anorectic and bulimic self. Moreover, as I demonstrate, the parody of body beautiful and attempted performance of power is ultimately unsuccessful as stratagem in both stories since the audience—in “Alchemy” Paula's best friend, father, and mother, and in “Spring Song of the Frogs” the main character Will—are unreceptive and even hostile to the performances.

Published almost twenty years apart, Atwood's “Spring Song of the Frogs” in *Bluebeard's Egg* in 1983 and Thien's “Alchemy” in *Simple Recipes* in 2001, the short stories provoke an eerily similar revelation of women's intimate understandings of what Orbach calls “body dis-ease” (*Bodies* 15). As discussed in the Introduction, Orbach's use of the hyphen highlights the extreme “gravity of body problems” (*Bodies* 15) by emphasizing the “hidden public health emergency” (*Bodies* 15) of eating distress, while the term itself positions uneasiness about the female body as a serious form of disease within our culture. Orbach's definition addresses the “troubled and shaming feelings” evident in Western cultures in the last few generations concerning the appearance of human bodies (*Bodies* 14). Of course, most who are familiar with Atwood's corpus know that much of her writing, both before and after *Bluebeard's Egg*, is concerned with female corporeality. As Madeleine Davies notes, several of Atwood's novels contain female protagonists who exhibit “marked signs of bodily unease” (58), and thus highlight the socio-cultural and socio-political ramifications of eating distress. Surprisingly, Elspeth Cameron reveals in her work on Atwood's 1969 novel *The Edible Woman* that Atwood “knew nothing” about anorexia at the time she was writing the novel, although the

novel's protagonist, Marian McAlpin, clearly exhibits symptoms of the disease (45).<sup>17</sup> By the time Atwood wrote "Spring Song of the Frogs" in the early 1980s, eating disorders were just beginning to show up on the cultural radar and in mass media within Canada. As Patricia Blake points out in her online review of *Bluebeard's Egg* for *Time* magazine, Atwood is able to represent issues like eating disorders and portray them as varied parts of a larger whole. Blake writes that "Reading Margaret Atwood's short stories is like seeing life studies done by an artist famous for large, symbolic canvases." In these short stories, eating disorders come to signify the larger canvas of women's lives as a whole. As this chapter demonstrates, the fictional characters of "Spring Song of the Frogs" are not just emblematic of the cultural paranoia about eating, evident in Will's date Robyn and the waitress who serves them, but also vividly represent both the anorexic and the bulimic, evident in Will's niece Cynthia and his romantic interest Diane.

Unlike Atwood, Thien's published works of fiction do not take the female body or disease as their main themes. While the body and its dis-ease play a lesser role in Thien's writing than in Atwood's, Thien reveals in an interview for *Maclean's* that her passion for dance and performance (she was a dance major before taking up creative writing) are evident in a bodily emphasis in her style of writing: "There's so much expression through the body that you have to telegraph what's going on, but as sparsely as you can" ("Dancing"). Writing like a dancer, then, Thien is cognizant of the ways in which bodies speak without words. As Janice Nimura posits in "Northwest Orient" in the *New York Times Book Review*, Thien "has a way with the small, quiet image that sums up an inexpressible ache." In "Alchemy," that "small, quiet image" is the body of the narrator's best friend. Beset by bulimia, Paula's body speaks its dis-ease, or as Nimura would call it, the "inexpressible ache" Paula suffers at the hands of her father.

---

<sup>17</sup> Cameron notes that *The Edible Woman* was published years before anorexia was a household term (45).

Through their fictionalized characters, Atwood and Thien question our society's normalizing of eating distress, weight preoccupation, and general body dis-ease. Indeed, both authors suggest that to be distressed about bodies is certainly the norm in our society, but paradoxically, that this distress and dis-ease is in fact *abnormal*: what we as a society have come to consider as normal, is not. As Orbach writes, "It is not a trivial problem just because it is a personal struggle which might be expressed as, and is sometimes mistaken for, an issue of vanity. It is far more serious than we first take it to be and it is only because it is now so ordinary to be distressed about our bodies or body parts that we dismiss the gravity of body problems" (*Bodies* 14-15). I understand Atwood and Thien's short stories as fictionalized expressions of Orbach's point; these stories lay bare the magnitude of body dis-ease in our culture, both clinically diagnosed disease and general body malaise.

To begin my analysis I ask: is it simplistic to imagine eating disorders as a basic response to our society's cult of thinness? After all, as Orbach notes, "few people would have difficulty in understanding this interest in becoming thin because it conforms to social expectations for women" (*Fat* 123-24). However, anorexia, like bulimia, is much more complex than a simple response to an ideal. As sociologist Debra Gimlin rightly points out in *Body Work*, women are not cultural dupes in their quest of an ideal body: "I find it implausible that the millions of women who engage in body work blindly submit to such control or choose to make their bodies physical manifestations of their own subordination" (2). Body work (in other words, any form of work on the body such as, though not limited to, exercise, cosmetic surgery, and diet) is not simply undertaken to achieve an ideal performance of femininity through an approximation of body beautiful. In fact, Gimlin's main argument is that body work engenders lessened feelings of shame for a body that does not replicate the ideal: "Because most women can never achieve an

ideal body, they must instead attempt to repair the flawed identities that imperfect bodies symbolize. . . . [B]ody work is in fact work on the self. By engaging in body work, women are able to negotiate normative identities by diminishing their personal responsibility for a body that fails to meet cultural mandates” (6). These “normative identities” that Gimlin discusses can be interpreted through Judith Butler’s ideas of gender as “performative” (190), since women’s body work can be understood as a “stylized repetition of acts” (191). Perhaps in performing body work women feel less dis-ease because this work aligns with Western notions of performed femininity. In performing their body work, Gimlin argues, women develop a sense of body ease, what she calls a “resource for resistance” and “a source of pleasure, rather than a form of domination” (146). These points are oftentimes overlooked in our incessant criticism of society’s cult of thinness; some body work—including a nutritious diet and exercise—is necessary in achieving and maintaining good health. However, while body work can be a source of pleasure and health, it can also, as it is in these two short stories, manifest as punishment and deprivation.

One can question whether eating distress, or more pointedly illnesses like anorexia or bulimia, which are severe manifestations of body work, are perhaps nothing more than “an exaggerated application of a diet” (Orbach, *Fat* 123). Elizabeth Grosz makes it clear that eating disorders are a good deal more than a vehicle to achieve an ideal body. Instead Grosz understands eating disorders in completely opposite terms; she argues that “Anorexia is a form of protest at the social meaning of the female body. Rather than seeing it simply as an out-of-control compliance with the current patriarchal ideals of slenderness, it is precisely a renunciation of these ‘ideals’” (40). In other words, anorexics reject and protest against Western notions of body beautiful, thumbing their noses at limiting body and beauty standards. Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs” demonstrates how the anorectic stance, manifested in the ultra-thin,

emaciated body, may be understood as protest against the ideal body beautiful. In considering the server in a restaurant that Will frequents, Atwood's third-person narrator makes comparisons between the ideal female body of Will's youth, and the current standard of the 1980s when the story was published:

The girl's arms, bone-skinny and white, come out of the puffs of cloth like the stems of peonies that have been grown in darkness. Her thighs will be much the same. Will can remember the thighs in the ancient men's magazines, the ones that were passed around when he was at school, black-and-white photos on cheap paper, with no air-brushing, the plump women posed in motel rooms, the way the garters would sink into the flesh of thighs and rump. Now there's no flesh, the thighs have shrivelled up, they're all muscle and bone. Even the *Playboy* centrefolds look as if they're made of solid gristle. It's supposed to be sexy to show them in leg warmers. (140)

This telling excerpt expresses the historical changes that have occurred to the ideal performance of femininity. In Will's younger years, fleshy women's bodies were ogled and sexualized as the ideal, with such women representing what Marilyn Yalom refers to in her research on representations of the breast as the "sex kitten" (192). To Will's dismay, the women sporting the body beautiful of the 1980s, however, are all "muscle and bone," evident in exaggeration in the waitress's physique. The centerfolds, women who achieve a likeness of body beautiful, are photographed wearing their body-work attire, suggesting that the 1980s performance of femininity most certainly includes fitness regimes, particularly aerobics.<sup>18</sup> The representations of

---

<sup>18</sup> In 2016, body-work attire, particularly black yoga pants, is frequently worn by women for everyday activities and not just during periods of body work. I wonder if this penchant for body-work attire bespeaks the notion that today's women are ready at all times to engage in body work. Are yoga pants a symbol of a woman's commitment to working towards body beautiful? Are they a "stylized repetition" (Butler 191) of a performance of femininity?



femininity of Will's youth—ample breasts, hips, bottoms, and thighs—have become unfashionable; the new standard of beauty for women is the worked body. As Orbach notes, “Our bodies are and have become a form of work. The body is turning from being the means of production to the production itself” (*Bodies* 8). Orbach rightly points out that many human bodies no longer toil in the fields performing the necessary labour to earn our daily bread; instead our bodies are the work, the “production” as it were. Humans work our bodies in order to achieve, as best we can, a likeness of the current ideal body beautiful.

Leaving aside this concept for the moment, let us consider the notion of body dis-ease. What if eating dis-ease can be explained by way of learned behaviour, particularly within the family? The crux of Orbach's 2009 study of body dis-ease, *Bodies*, paints eating distress as a learned performance of femininity. What begins as a cultural phenomenon is spread within the family: “[C]urrent cultural discourse on the body means that we have entered a new epoch of body destabilisation, and that there is a new franticness surrounding the body induced by social forces which are absorbed and transmitted in the family” (9). Orbach understands body dis-ease as being passed down from parent to child, what she calls “a transgenerational transmission of anxious embodiment” (*Bodies* 12). While I find this argument cogent, particularly the notion of eating distress as a learned performance of femininity, I do not see evidence of transgenerational transmission in either “Spring Song of the Frogs” or “Alchemy.” It seems clear from the sheer magnitude of body shame in all the female characters in Atwood's short story, that Atwood represents the transmission of “anxious embodiment” not specifically as transgenerational. Rather, feminine body dis-ease is presented hauntingly as a “wordless decree” (Atwood 139), or as Butler would argue, a “corporeal style” that is both “intentional and performative” (190),

demonstrating the danger of the all-powerful body beautiful cultural discourse that permeates Western cultures.

As Grosz would have us understand, anorexics protest these ideals through the exaggeration or camp excess of the resulting emaciated bodies. Almost all sexual femininity is disavowed in the emaciated body, evident in Will's uncertainty about the waitress's gender: "The waitress returns with the drinks, and Will, in view of the two slight bumps visible on her ribcage, decides that she really is a woman after all" (141). The social meaning of the anorectic body is one of *renunciation*; her asexuality speaks her resistance to the sexually beautiful female body. This same concept of an anorexic performing asexuality with her body is explored further when Will visits his anorexic niece in the hospital, discovering that she is "beyond needs" (145), whether they be dietary or sexual.

Grosz's argument of the anorectic stance as renunciation of the ideal through compliance to the nth degree is paradoxical. But Grosz is not alone in making this apparently contradictory argument; many others theorize the anorectic and bulimic stances in this particular fashion. In her examination of the eating distress in the life and works of Virginia Woolf, scholar Allie Glenny, too, pinpoints such a stance as paradoxical: "One of its many paradoxes is that while on an overt level it bespeaks superlative conformity to androcratic dictates, subtextually it expresses powers of dauntless resistance and ferocious rebellion" (4). The determination to disavow one's feminine sexuality seems paramount to the anorexic, but as Glenny reveals, the resulting slenderness still suggests conformity to body beautiful. While Glenny, Bordo, and Grosz do not include bulimia in their arguments, I certainly see their arguments about anorexia as applicable to the performance of bulimia. While the anorexic restricts/denies herself or himself food, and the bulimic intermixes periods of fasting with bingeing and purging (taunting the body, as it

were—punishing it by forcefully removing food by any means necessary) both use these strategies as a means to achieve an excessive “out-of-control compliance” (Grosz 40). Their practitioners may use different methods, yet anorectic and bulimic stances are both contingent on an audience observing the performances and, most importantly, comprehending these performances as parodies of the body beautiful, critiquing our culture’s very narrow definition of feminine body ideals.

As will be demonstrated in the examination of “Alchemy,” Paula’s bulimia (paralleling Glenny’s description of anorexia) is her means to achieving a body that is asexual in order to circumvent her father’s abusive incestuous practices. At one point in the narrative, Paula appears to the narrator, Miriam, at school, and Miriam is astonished at just how much weight she has lost: “[I]t made her face thin and freakish” (66). Like anorexia, Paula’s bulimia is her act of resistance, providing a body that performs asexually.<sup>19</sup> While Glenny sees the anorectic statement as paradoxical, Susan Bordo argues that the paradox of compliance and resistance in the female anorectic body is a physical manifestation of both resistance to and reprimand of the sexual violence she has experienced (8). Thus, as Glenny notes, “superlative conformity” can usher in a freedom from the sexual attention of heterosexual males, at the same time as it serves as a metaphoric flagellation of the self. Misguided as it is for the victim to blame herself, the eating disorder functions as a corporeal punishment. As I explore Bordo’s argument in reference to Thien’s “Alchemy,” it will be apparent how Paula’s bulimia can be understood both as an attempt to resist the sexual attention of her father by making her body asexual, and also as an admonishment of her body in its denial of nourishing food.

---

<sup>19</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, in “White Shoulders,” Jill does the opposite, bingeing as means to perform her body asexually.

Psychologist Analu Verbin catalogues the multitude of ways that anorexia can be understood as not only paradoxical but also parodic. Aligning her claim with Butler's notion of gender as performative, Verbin argues that by "taking the feminine model to the extreme, the anorexic shows us that there is nothing 'natural' or 'authentic' about femininity. Rather, it is a performance, a fiction requiring endless efforts to maintain" (39). Clearly, the performance changes through the years; in "Spring Song of the Frogs," the sex kitten of Will's youth has been replaced by the sinewy aerobics goddess. That said, all the women surrounding Will—the waitress, his date, his niece, and his love interest Diane—take the ideal to a parodic extreme, performing their femininity asexually. This is what Verbin refers to as the paradox of femininity: "[I]n her pursuit of thinness, the anorexic conforms to cultural norms of female attractiveness; she takes the ideal of the slim and tender woman to the extreme. . . . On the other hand, anorexia suppresses any physical trace of femininity, including menstruation, and by this it embodies a total rejection of the feminine identity, both on the child-adult and on the male-female axes" (44). Thus the anorectic body transgresses the ideal body beautiful in its superlative achievement. This body is the exaggeration of the cultural norm, the medium for a theatrical and campy performance that shares similarities with drag. Butler writes that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (186). Just as drag demonstrates the imitative construction of gender, the results of anorexia—an asexual femininity—mock the concept of an "authentic" femininity (Verbin 39). As Atwood's short story suggests, such a performance keeps men like Will not only at a distance, but also feeling defeated in the search for sexual companionship.

In “Spring Song of the Frogs,” there is a strong sense that Atwood is proffering weight preoccupation and eating distress as all-encompassing cultural phenomena of the 1980s, in which all women seem driven by a need to inhabit body beautiful through any means necessary. In his review of *Bluebeard’s Egg* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert Towers touches on Atwood’s ability to infuse her short stories with sociological insights: “At times their inspiration seems as much journalistic or sociological as fictional. . . . Her psychological astuteness is everywhere in evidence.” If in fact her motivation is a fictionalized reportage of the cultural obsession with body beautiful, then I believe she astutely sketches not only the body dis-ease in her female characters, but also the destructiveness that a transgressive performance entails. Take, for instance, the introductory paragraph to “Spring Song of the Frogs,” in which Will finds his mind wandering while he is at a restaurant on a first date with a woman named Robyn. The reader learns Will’s thoughts on both lipstick and complexion colour, which he sees as transient, beset by fashion trends that “wax and wane, from season to season” (139). The ephemeral nature of style dictated by the omnipresent yet intangible conception of fashion experienced by women as a “wordless decree” (139) hints at the dominant theme of Atwood’s story: the danger of the omnipotence of body beautiful cultural discourse. Women’s corporeal selves, like their clothes or nail colour, are upheld as changeable and malleable entities, required to conform to particular concepts of the ideal figure no matter how narrow (literally and figuratively) these are. Atwood’s story demonstrates Orbach’s ironic representation of the ubiquity of participation in the body beautiful ideal: “Your body . . . is your canvas to be fixed, remade and enhanced. Join in. Enjoy. Be part of it” (*Bodies* 1). Invitingly democratised as available to all who perform “hard work and watchfulness” (*Bodies* 6), the right body is the woman’s ticket to social status, love, and

happiness. Succinctly put, body beautiful is a vehicle for “belonging in our world today” (*Bodies* 3).

Unfortunately, like all ideals, this aesthetic is intangible. In the quest to achieve this ideal through various forms of body work (Gimlin), what is produced as consequence is what Orbach refers to as “body instability and body shame” (*Bodies* 8). All of the female characters presented by Atwood in “Spring Song of the Frogs” have discernible weight preoccupation and eating distress. For example, both Will’s date, Robyn, and his niece, Cynthia, seem to fear food on a visceral level. At one point during their meal, Will offers Robyn some bread, only to be rebuffed: “‘Pardon?’ says Robyn, as if *bread* is a word she’s never heard before. ‘Oh. No thanks.’ She gives a little shudder, as if the thought of it is slightly repulsive” (141). His niece, hospitalized for anorexia, is equally scornful of the oranges and apple on her night table. To Will, “[s]he speaks of the fruit as if it were an undifferentiated mass, like cold porridge” (145). Food is not understood as pleasurable, nor even nutritious, but instead something to be feared. Robyn and Cynthia’s disdain for food and seeming indifference to the joys of sharing a meal with friends or family is discouraging to Will, inducing feelings of defeat. With the restaurant meal just ordered (spinach salad with no dressing for Robyn), Will begins to sweat, feels claustrophobic, and “is anxious to be gone” from both the meal and Robyn (142). Likewise, when Will leaves Cynthia in the hospital after his visit, he does so “feeling as defeated as she wants him to feel. He hasn’t made any difference” (146). Will suffers a sense of powerlessness against others’ body dis-ease, and does not comprehend the possible messages in their performances.

While proof of transgenerational transmission of body dis-ease is lacking in Atwood and Thien’s short stories, there is an abundance of evidence to support anorectic and bulimic stances as paradoxical and parodic. While Will in Atwood’s short story never reports that Cynthia is

suffering from an eating disorder, it is clearly insinuated by her painful admission that she has gained a pound thanks to her stay in the hospital. Her eating disorder is obvious based on Will's description of her sitting in her hospital bed, noting specifically how her emaciated body looks child-like: "Cynthia is white on white. . . . She's not wearing the hospital gown but a white nightgown with ruffles, childish, Victorian, reminiscent of lacey drawers and Kate Greenaway greeting cards" (142). This description, along with her statement at the ripe age of eighteen, "I use to be pretty, when I was younger" (145), suggests a yearning for a return to a child-like state. As Orbach affirms, "Anorexia reflects an ambivalence about femininity, a rebellion against feminization that in its particular form expresses both a rejection and an exaggeration of the image. The refusal of food which makes her extremely thin straightens out the girl's curves in a denial of her essential femaleness" (*Fat* 125). Indeed, Cynthia's body and the clothes she uses to perform her femininity suggest her renunciation of adult femininity and sexuality, preferring instead to project a body that is "beyond needs" (145). Even Will picks up on Cynthia's performed asexuality, alarmingly noting that he used to feel a "disturbing sexual pull towards her" when she was a younger teenager with loose hair and golden skin, a sexual pull he admits he "certainly doesn't feel now" (143).

This renunciation of adult female femininity and resulting withdrawal from family and friends is also apparent in Thien's "Alchemy," in which Paula, like Cynthia, tries to renounce her femaleness, but in her case through bulimic actions. In both cases the sexual pull is "disturbing" as it is directed from adult men toward their very young female relatives (Paula as daughter and Cynthia as niece). It remains unclear, however, if Cynthia has ever experienced sexual trauma as Paula clearly has in "Alchemy." There is no evidence in Atwood's narrative that points to Cynthia's anorectic stance as stratagem to halt an inappropriate sexual relationship. That said,

when Will first enters his niece's hospital room, she responds in a manner that suggests she fears his presence by her bedside: "She draws the sheet up to her chest, backing away from him, against the headboard of the bed, a position that reminds him of a sickly Rosetti [sic] Madonna, cringing against the wall while the angel of the Annunciation threatens her with fullness" (142). This passage does suggest a sexual fear on the part of the niece, as these paintings were representations of the angel Gabriel threatening Mary with pregnancy (Fig. 1).





Fig. 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Annunciation*, Tate Museum.

It is unclear whether Cynthia specifically fears Will, or whether her reaction to his presence is because of Will's masculinity and his ability, as a male, to impregnate her "with fullness."

Alternatively still, her fear might simply be the result of her eating disorder; she may fear Will and any other visitor because they may offer her food or pressure her to eat during their visits.

The fact that Atwood alludes to the virgin Mother as comparison with Cynthia's anorectic stance, however, implies a possible fear of male sexual attention. As Verbin would note, anorexia as paradox of femininity ensures that Cynthia can safely encompass a virginal persona. There is less risk, in her eyes, of male impropriety to her while she inhabits the anorectic body.

Cynthia's motivation may lie only in peer pressure, or so her mother believes: "It's an epidemic. . . . It's some kind of a fad. You know what she actually said? She actually said a lot of the girls at school were doing it. She's so goddamned competitive" (143). Cynthia's mother makes a valid observation, calling anorexia "an epidemic," a statement with which Orbach would certainly agree. As she argues about contemporary young women, "A constant fretfulness and vigilance take hold for many from the moment they wake until the time they fall asleep. Their bodies are on high alert. The norm has become to worry" (*Bodies* 3-4). Where, then, is the line between feeling and acting on the pressure to comply with the all-encompassing body beautiful cultural discourse and the clinical illnesses of anorexia and bulimia? The norm may not be ideal in terms of health, as stated earlier in the chapter, but what makes a woman choose or capitulate to anorectic and bulimic stances? Is this "ferocious rebellion" (Glenny 4) or "out-of-control compliance" (Grosz 40), or both?

Verbin extends these questions further, arguing that the eating disorder is also a paradox of body and mind: "On the one hand, anorexics often describe their symptom as the victory of mental will power over the bodily needs, namely, hunger. . . . Yet anorexics also express the

opposite view; namely, that the ‘mind’, or ‘emotions’ are weak and evil, and the only thing that can be controlled, hence relied upon, is their body” (46-47). Accordingly, when Will congratulates Cynthia on gaining a pound, her response pinpoints this paradox of body and mind: “‘I hardly ate anything,’ she says, plaintively but also boasting” (144). Her statement demonstrates her own disavowal of her bodily needs, a triumph of mind over body. Cynthia is proud of her ability to control her body’s appetite, yet within the hospital setting her body is actually under the control of the health care workers trying to help her overcome this disease, demonstrating in no uncertain terms that eating disorders are inherently paradoxical. Will is correct in his assessment of Cynthia’s determination to continue her anorectic stance: “It would do no good to tell her she’s a wraith, that if she doesn’t eat she’ll digest herself, that her heart is a muscle like any other muscle and if it isn’t fed it will atrophy” (144). Cynthia knows the clinical repercussions of her eating disorder, but in the end, her body is her own; she is the one who ultimately decides how she will perform her femininity and whether or not that performance will transgress through parody. Unfortunately for Cynthia, her parody of the ideal is lost on her audience; neither her mother nor her uncle understands the anorectic stance as anything other than a “superlative conformity” (Glenny 4) to the ideal body beautiful, making this performance unsuccessful.

The third and final section of Atwood’s short story takes Will far from the city, but even there he cannot escape the eating distress and weight preoccupation that seems to have seeped into the psyches of all the females with whom he interacts. In fact, the arrival of his old flame Diane at his country house marks the beginning of a crystallization of his understanding of the eating distress and body dis-ease surrounding him. From the outset of her visit, as the narrator notes, Will notices everything about Diane’s reduced physicality: “Will watches her while she’s

bending over. She has a wide cotton skirt on, pulled tight around the waist; she's lost a lot of weight. He used to think of her as a hefty woman, well-fleshed and athletic, but now she's almost spindly. In his arms she felt frail, diminished" (148). For Will, Diane's weight loss is seen in a negative light; while her body may display a form of ideal body beautiful, such a body, in Will's mind, is lesser for it. Now "spindly," "frail," and "diminished," Diane is wasting away, just like the other women of "Spring Song of the Frogs." Slowly, Will begins to link Diane's physicality, along with that of Robyn and Cynthia, with that of the general female populace. Moreover, Will understands the waning of female bodies as a marker of women's overall weakening, evident in various facets such as their voices. For instance, Will notices that Diane's face is "thinner and more lined, which makes her look more elegant but less accessible. She's less talkative than she used to be as well. . . . He thinks women in general are becoming more silent: it goes with their new pale lips. They're turning back to secrecy, concealment. It's as if they're afraid of something, but Will can't imagine what" (149). Will cannot appreciate the *raison d'être* behind women's drive not just to emulate but, in the cases of the fictional female characters, to exceed the cultural ideal of body beautiful and a concomitant silencing of their voices and fear of exposure to the world. Akin to his sister's understanding of the anorectic stance as "a fad," Will appreciates this waning of the women who surround him as similar to an ephemeral fashion trend. As with fashion, however, Will hopes the tides will turn, that women will again choose speech instead of silence, body ease instead of dis-ease, "sex kitten" (Yalom 192) instead of "sickly Rosetti Madonna" (Atwood 142).

Explicating the forces behind the parodic anorectic version of performed femininity, Verbin makes a cogent point in regards to the importance of audience: "[P]arody also implies that if we fail to understand the deep meaning of anorexia as a cultural symptom, if we miss the

parodic perspective it offers on gender and culture, then they only serve to perpetuate and reproduce the same gender norms that generate it in the first place. This is indeed the risk of parody” (51). What makes the stratagem potentially unsuccessful, as Verbin sees it, is the possibility of an unreceptive audience; without a receptive audience there is no opportunity for the performance to transmit angst against our culture’s deep-seated conceptions surrounding femininity and gender performance. Applied to Atwood’s story, while women whittle themselves down in a camp-like performance of the ideal body beautiful, Will as focalizer fails to notice the “parodic perspective” (Verbin 51) inherent in such a performance. Moreover, his unresponsiveness eventually turns to hostility. In one final, albeit extreme, example of the lengths to which these female characters will go in order to achieve or parody the body beautiful, Will overhears Diane in the act of vomiting her meal: “As he’s coming back down the stairs, he hears her in the bathroom: it sounds as if she’s throwing up. . . . He knows he should feel compassion; instead he feels betrayed by her” (150). Will’s sense of betrayal suggests that Diane’s bulimic actions and emaciated body provide her with the necessary accoutrements to belong to this group of women who are shrinking before his eyes: the waitress with “slight bumps” instead of breasts (141), the bread-fearing date Robyn, and the wraith-like niece Cynthia. Will feels betrayed by Diane particularly because he remembers how much pleasure he was able to take in her body previously. Recalling her once “hefty,” “well-fleshed,” and “athletic” body (148), he is hostile to her betrayal because he cannot or will not comprehend the message. When Diane joins him outside after the episode in the bathroom, “she seems all right, and Will decides not to ask her about it” (150). Diane may “seem” all right, but Will’s decision not to inquire about her vomiting or extreme weight loss situates Will as a passive spectator in this performance. As in all of his interactions with the story’s female characters, Will remains

oblivious to the possibility of a message in the anorectic and bulimic stance. He is self-absorbed by the way these women's bodies affect his performance of masculinity, and the fact that the sexual pull he once felt towards these women is no more.

As Thien's "Alchemy" also demonstrates, the bulimic performance can fall on deaf ears and blind eyes, with devastating results. In her favourable review of *Simple Recipes*, the collection that contains "Alchemy," Joan Givner is impressed by Thien's style, noting her "great delicacy and sensitivity" and above all her "ability to render loneliness and isolation unbearably moving" (126). As Givner attests, the stories resonate with the solitude of the various characters; in the case of "Alchemy," the solitude is a direct result of a family that cannot come to terms with the abusive incest that is occurring within it. Whereas Atwood portrays eating distress and body dis-ease as an omnipresent cultural phenomenon, Thien's "Alchemy" presents fractious eating and bulimic behaviour as a response to the sexual abuse occurring within a family. Similar to "Spring Song of the Frogs," the focalizer reports the eating and body dis-ease around her. In "Alchemy," the narrator, Miriam, recounts her relationship with her best friend, Paula, who is suffering from bulimia. As teenage girls, Miriam and Paula share almost everything with one another, staying up late telling stories about love interests, homework and, of course, family problems. In her review of the collection, Janice Nimura touches on this fact, noting that all the stories in the collection "share a sameness of mood and situation: girls and young women transfixed between love and disappointment, aware of the cracks in their family foundations and unable to step around them." Indeed, this awareness of the "cracks" within the family is evident in "Alchemy." However, I argue that instead of being "unable to step around" these cracks, the story's characters become adept at deflecting and even ignoring not only the "cracks" created by Paula's bulimia, but also Paula's attempts to reveal her sexual trauma; her bodily cries for help

fall on deaf ears. That said, this audience moves from passive to hostile as Paula's performance becomes even more excessive in its transgression of the ideal female body.

In another favourable online review of *Simple Recipes*, Carol Haggas touches on the poignancy of Thien's collection: "Speaking in a voice eloquently empathetic, warm, and wise, Thien creates melancholy characterizations and plaintive plots that sear the memory with their piercing resolve, depicting longing that is nearly palpable in its desperation." Nowhere is this "melancholy characterization" more evident than in the desperation of Paula. Readers learn early in the short story that Paula is bulimic, although her bulimia is at first explicated as engendered from her desire to attain the cultural ideal of body beautiful; the story thus initially seems to exemplify Verbin's concept of eating disorders as parody of femininity.<sup>20</sup> After a family dinner at Paula's house, Miriam describes how she "stood back while Paula threw up dinner. Her hair, bleached blonde, stuck to her face. She rinsed her mouth and said, 'I only throw up dinners. You only have an eating disorder if you throw up everything'" (59). This sad admission of Paula's is troubling on many levels. Her acknowledgment of vomiting her evening meals, while resolutely denying that her actions indicate bulimia (or any eating disorder or distress for that matter), demonstrates how *blasé* Paula feels about weight preoccupation and eating distress in general. Paula appears to parrot the thoughts and actions of an entire generation of young women. In *Bodies*, Orbach distressingly acknowledges how the last few generations of Western women express body dis-ease as natural: "We have become so implicated in variants of body preoccupation ourselves, and girls and women in particular so colonised by it, that the preoccupation has become second nature—almost 'natural' and invisible" (*Bodies* 4). To Paula then, her body/weight preoccupation is 'natural' because, in her own words, "I only throw up

---

<sup>20</sup> Verbin's argument is placed specifically in the paradigm of the anorectic and not the bulimic. I argue that while the strategies of disordered eating are different, the goal is the same, and thus I apply her theories about anorexia to representations of bulimia.

dinners” (59). And while Paula needs to qualify her actions with such a statement, in itself suggesting that she knows on some level that her actions are abnormal, Miriam makes no judgement on Paula’s bulimic behaviour. Miriam’s silence suggests her own implication within this culture of weight distress and the actions that such distresses provoke. It also indicates Miriam as passive audience to Paula’s performance. Only later in the narrative does Miriam become unsympathetic, just as Will does in reaction to Diane’s vomiting their shared steak dinner. Miriam becomes so overwhelmed by Paula’s transgressive femininity as stratagem at the end of the narrative, that Miriam turns to violence as tactic to end Paula’s performance.

The weight discourse continues after Paula justifies her bulimic actions with a treatise on body types. Here Paula and Miriam invoke a commonplace exchange between women, what anthropologist Mimi Nichter refers to as “fat talk”:

Paula told me that there were four kinds of bodies: the X, the A, the Y and the O. “You’re an X,” she said, “small waist and evenly proportioned chest and butt.” She turned sideways. “What do you think I am?”

“An X.”

“Wrong,” she smirked. “Nice try. I’m more of an A. Heavy on the bottom.” She picked up my wrist and measured it with her fingers. Her thumb and index finger touched. “You’re lucky. Everyone wants to be an X.” (59-60)

Paula’s affirmation of Miriam’s even proportions and desirable “X” body type demonstrates the deep-rootedness of the cultural ideal. Paula’s disdainful indictment of her own “A” body type alongside Miriam’s suggestion that Paula is, in fact, an “X,” re-envisages the “fat talk” banter that Nichter proposes young women use as a support mechanism: “The statement ‘I’m so fat’ is actually much more than an observation about how a girl looks or feels. It is a call for support



from her peers. The response she receives from her friends is an affirmation that she is, in fact, *not* fat, and that things aren't as bad as they seem" (47). According to Nichter's premise, when Paula queries Miriam as to her body type, Miriam responds appropriately that she has an "X" body type, for it approximates the closest to the ideal body beautiful. In turn, Paula plays along with the "fat talk" exchange with her smirking denial of Miriam's positive response.

However, Nichter complicates her "fat talk" theory by arguing that women who genuinely suffer from an eating disorder and engage in such discourse do so not for reasons of affirmation, but instead justification:

Girls who are anorexic or bulimic also participate in this [fat talk] discourse. The difference is that they mean it literally and are speaking out loud to themselves, not to others. When friends respond, "No you're not" to their complaints of being fat, they do not believe them. How could their friends not see how fat they are? For such girls, the impact of fat talk may not be transient. Indeed, this discourse may serve to legitimize a position that is potentially dangerous. (59)

This theory pertaining specifically to anorectic and bulimic stances does approximate more closely the exchange between Thien's characters. Miriam's hesitant response to Paula's query and Paula's all-too-quick denial exemplify Nichter's concept that the bulimic subject does not engage in "fat talk" to bolster her self-image through hearing the negation of fatness, but conversely as a way to justify disordered eating. Instead of hearing Miriam's affirmation that Paula does in fact envisage her as having the acceptable X body type, all Paula hears is her own negative body talk. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Paula not only justifies her bulimia through "fat talk" but also uses her bulimic stance as a defence against her father.

We quickly learn in Thien's story that Paula is afraid of her father, but like her best friend Miriam, we are left in the dark as to the reasons. Her fear is particularly evident in scenes in which her father is presented through light imagery. In the first instance, Paula and Miriam are outside on Paula's back lawn playing with her mother's hutch rabbits:

At one point, a light came on in the kitchen and we froze. Paula's dad stood at the window, a glass of water in his hand. He took forever to drink it, staring straight at us through the glass, but we trusted the dark and willed ourselves invisible. When the light in the kitchen went off, we breathed easy again, felt the chill in the wind, came back to life. (61-62)

This idea of invisibility is paramount to an understanding of body dis-ease and eating disorders. For many women, the eating disorder is stratagem to figuratively and literally disappear. Orbach refers to this as a "[c]onscious desire not to be noticed" (*Fat* 128). In most cases, this desire stems from unwanted sexual attention. Just as Cynthia hides from her uncle Will under the sheets (and away from society in general as she resides in the hospital) in "Spring Song of the Frogs," Paula hides from her father by way of the outside darkness and even by way of Miriam herself, inviting Miriam to sleep over on an almost nightly basis in the hopes that her father will not assault her with her friend in the house. Miriam describes one such night sleeping in Paula's bedroom: "Before she [Paula] fell asleep, she turned over and held on to me. Her grip was so plaintive that I felt sorry for her and held on, too. I had the sense that some things were impossible for her to say" (62-63). Finding it impossible to speak of the sexual assault, Paula uses her body as stratagem to both speak her pain and end the abuse by attaching herself to a bodily companion and inhabiting asexuality.

Through the lens of corporeal theory, Bordo explores the female anorectic body as a physical manifestation of resistance to and reprimand of sexual violence:

[A]norexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the ‘femaleness’ of the body and a punishment of its desires. . . . The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure ‘male’ will, *or* she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground. (8)

Bordo’s claims surrounding anorexia as response to sexual abuse are paradoxical, as are many of the theories presented by Verbin and Grosz. On the one hand, the anorexic believes her performance of femininity is so ideal that it is the cause of the abuse (a form of blaming the victim/self), and on the other hand, the anorectic performs her femininity to the parodic extreme, making her physicality asexual. If we apply this argument to Paula’s eating disorder, her bulimia manifests as direct reaction to the sexual interest of her father, and the paradox inherent in the eating disorder is apparent. Paula punishes her body through her bulimic actions, wrongly believing that she is to blame for her father’s actions. However, the parodic extreme also manifests oppositely through excessive weight evident in such characters as Jill in Linda Svendsen’s “White Shoulders,” whose sudden weight gain and furtive binge eating is, like the weight change and actions of Paula in “Alchemy,” a reaction to sexual abuse at the hands of her father.

Like her body dis-ease, there are clues littered throughout the narrative that something is not right in Paula’s home. Miriam recounts an occasion when she slept over with Paula and, in

the middle of the night, “heard voices, a man and a woman. They were whispering, and he was impatient with her. I thought I felt Paula get up and leave me but when I woke up in the night I was confused because it was only the two of us in her bedroom. Paula had one arm across my waist; she had her face buried against my arm” (68). Even with Miriam present in her bedroom, Paula is apparently unable to stop her father’s sexual abuse; her strategies are failing one by one.

Verbin argues that there is a paradox of femininity and a paradox of mind and body in those with eating disorders (as is evident in Atwood’s fictional female characters), but she sees a third paradox: the paradox of control. She argues that while eating disorders are “traditionally understood as an attempt to regain control,” at the same time they represent “a total loss of control, as there is no sense of choice or power” in the symptoms of eating disorders (45). Most who suffer from such disorders explain their illness in this fashion, citing food as the only area in their lives over which they have complete control. In Atwood’s short story, Diane cannot control what Will is serving for dinner, but she can control what she puts in her mouth and what she regurgitates. Similarly, Paula cannot control her father’s behaviour, but she can, like Diane, control what she eats and what she purges as a way of transforming her body from one that is sexually appealing to her father, to one that is asexual and, she hopes, unappealing. Neither Paula nor Diane has control over how their bodies symptomize their disorder, attesting to Verbin’s beliefs concerning loss of control, power, and sense of choice when stricken with an eating disorder.

The parody of body beautiful is ultimately unsuccessful as a stratagem for Paula because her audience is unreceptive to her performance: her father continues to assault her even though she transforms her femininity from ideal to asexual. Her attempt at “Alchemy,” as the title implies, is a failed transformation. Significantly, Paula’s mother is also privy to her performance

but unresponsive to its appeal. In an attempt to reveal the abuse to her mother, Paula explains that she no longer wants to spend time alone with her father in the shed under the pretext of fixing cars. Paula discloses to Miriam that her mother is unwilling and/or unable to believe her daughter's claim: "My Mom told me, 'This is how families fall apart.' I didn't want to believe her, but I did. So I kept going back. I can't stop it. I think maybe I'm the one who's sick" (70). To Miriam, Paula admits that she cannot stop her father's abuse and that she wrongfully believes she is to blame. This position is reminiscent of Bordo's claims regarding eating disorders as self-punishment for having been victimized. Through bulimic activities, Paula is able both to rebel against her femininity (to which her father is attracted) by taking on asexual form, and to discipline her body for being an unwilling participant in the abuse. As witness to this performance, Miriam has been unreceptive. However, with Paula's verbal acknowledgement of abuse, Miriam turns hostile: "I knew what was coming next and I didn't want to hear it. I shook my head to block her out. . . . I hit her across the mouth to stop her. A loose hit, palm flat, the smack high-pitched" (70-71). This culminating moment when Paula finally expresses her distress explicitly and verbally, not just through her bodily performance of protest, overwhelms her audience. Miriam does not possess the tools to make sense of Paula's claim; thus Miriam severs her role as audience to Paula's performance with violence, both physically with the smack and verbally when Miriam accuses Paula of being complicit in the abuse. The last words that Miriam speaks to Paula are ones full of anger: "Why do you let him do it?" (71).

Bereft of an empathetic or receptive ear in either her mother or her best friend, and unable to end her father's abuse through bulimic strategies, Paula is left with no alternatives. She runs away from home. Only towards narrative's end, when Miriam is interviewed by a counsellor and youth officer attempting to find the missing Paula, does Miriam find the courage

to speak the truth. Miriam hints at the inappropriateness of the relationship between father and daughter, culminating in a final revelation: "I know that in her own house, Paula was always afraid to sleep alone" (75). Unable to come to terms with the possibility of an incestuous relationship between her daughter and her husband, Paula's mother asks Miriam in an accusatory fashion, "What are you trying to do? . . . How can you do this? How dare you lie like that?" (75). If Paula's parodic bulimic stance, and her own revelation of her father's abuse, are not enough to sway the mother, it is not surprising that the mother remains in denial about the corroborative evidence of her daughter's friend. Right to the end, even after the performance has come to a close, as Paula has run away from home, Paula's mother is unable or unwilling to consider the parodic message of her daughter's bulimia.

To emphasize their representation of the eating disorder as parody in their short stories, Atwood and Thien both utilise animals as motifs. Symbols of oppression and illness, frogs and rabbits, like the women they stand in for, are both waxing and waning; in "Alchemy" the rabbits are bulking up in their hutch only to meet their demise by becoming meat on the dinner plate, and in Atwood's story Will sees the frogs as symbolic. In his quest to bed Diane, Will romances her out onto the patio to see the full moon, drink brandy, and listen to the song of the frogs: "For Will they've come to mean spring and the beginning of summer: possibilities, newness" (151). Will interprets the frog song as an audible signifier, suggesting the cyclicity of nature and possibly that of relationships; if the frogs return to trill, why not a return of Diane as lover? But, as Will holds her, he begins to think that the frogs, like Diane, signify something very different than they did previously: "They stand there looking at the moon, which is cold and lopsided, and listening to the trilling of the frogs. This doesn't have the effect on Will he has hoped it would. The voices coming from the darkness below the curve of the hill sound thin and ill. There aren't

as many frogs as there used to be, either” (151). Bringing the short story to a close with these final lines denotes, in a slightly heavy-handed way, the waning and illness (read anorexia and bulimia) of the female characters. The bulimic Diane and the anorexic Cynthia, as well as the bread-rejecting Robyn and the so-thin-she-looks-asexual waitress, are all examples of the parodic extreme; their eating distress and resulting transgressive bodies represent culture-wide phenomena. In fact, their bodies are no longer transgressive because such bodies have become the cultural norm. Orbach argues that body dis-ease is now so “ordinary” in Western culture that society dismisses the seriousness of body problems (*Bodies* 15). What is so problematic about the parodic body stance is the loss of voice that Atwood suggests accompanies this stratagem. Through these lithe bodies, Atwood positions anorectic and bulimic stances as life threatening to the corporeal self, but just as importantly, as inherently voiceless. The women’s bodies try to speak their rebellion against the female body beautiful, but there is always the danger of a hostile or unresponsive audience, here represented by Will. As Verbin notes at the end of her chapter, if the audience is not receptive of the “parodic perspective” (51), then the body signifies only a perpetuation of a very narrow ideal.

The hutch rabbits in Thien’s short story have a rather different meaning. In this story, the hunter versus hunted plays out between Paula’s mother and the hutch rabbits in much the same way as it does between Paula’s father and Paula herself. In fact, the ominous whisper of Paula to the rabbits, “Be free or be stew” (61), hauntingly foreshadows Paula’s own decision at narrative’s end to run away from her home rather than submit to her father’s incestuous abuse, a metaphoric consuming of his daughter. Like the rabbits, Paula is better off running away than living with her family and being subjected to her father’s perverse sexual appetite. Some of the

reviewers of *Simple Recipes* find this metaphor too simplistic;<sup>21</sup> as Jeff Zaleski argues in *Publishers Weekly*, “As powerful as most of the stories are, they sometimes suffer from the obviousness of their metaphors.” While this connection of Paula to the rabbit seems fairly clear-cut, Thien complicates the matter considerably with the death of a hutch rabbit at the hands of Paula. During one of their many sleepovers, Miriam and Paula play with the hutch rabbits, trying to coax them to freedom: “She gathered the nearest one in her arms. Then she stood and walked across the veranda, the rabbit bundled against her chest. At the railing she stopped, stretched her arms out and held it straight in front of her. There was laundry on the line, shirts pinned up like paper cut-outs. A light came on in her parents’ bedroom. Paula opened her arms. I saw the rabbit falling slowly” (67). I interpret Paula’s actions not as accidental, but murderous. Rather than allow this rabbit to end his or her days as meat in a stew, Paula takes matters into her own hands and purposely drops the rabbit to its death. Since the light in the parents’ bedroom is a symbol of the father’s power and dominance, the light becomes the catalyst for the murder. Paula quickly learns that this course of action as strategy to gain freedom, while preventing consumption, still ends in death. While the bulimic stance as parody could, if taken to the extreme, also end in death, without a receptive audience this strategy is also abandoned. Only flight from the home ends the incestuous trauma.

Neither Paula’s bulimia in “Alchemy” nor the female characters’ various forms of eating distress in “Spring Song of the Frogs” capture an attentive audience, although they are parodic performances of the ideal body beautiful. The numerous paradoxes inherent in eating disorders, as argued by Verbin, muddy the performances, so much so that the transgressive bodies purport only an exaggerated adherence in their message. However, such a conclusion is not an

---

<sup>21</sup> Givner makes a similar statement in her review for *The Malahat Review*, but notes that the stories are “more than redeemed by writing of great delicacy and sensitivity” (126).



indictment of the parodic performance or performers, but rather a heartbreaking reflection of the incomprehension of their audiences. Neither Will, nor Paula's mother or friend Miriam, sees the anorexia, the bulimia, the body dis-ease, as stratagems with a purpose. Because they do not understand the eating disorder as performance, they become not only unresponsive but hostile to the performance itself (denial of food, purging of food) and the resulting asexual corporeality of the performer. This denial of "essential femaleness" (Orbach, *Fat* 125) by way of the anorectic and bulimic stance thus becomes an unhealthy and ineffectual form of resistance. As I have demonstrated throughout my analysis, theorists, clinicians, and scholars of body theory are in agreement that anorexia is "a form of protest at the social meaning of the female body" (Grosz 40). The examples of Atwood's characterization of Diane and Thien's characterization of Paula suggest that those who are bulimic and anorexic are equally able to protest body beautiful ideals through camp excess. As Western society continues to "dismiss the gravity of body problems" (Orbach, *Bodies* 14-15), these stories by Atwood and Thien serve to reinforce the need to question performances of femininity and the body work that women undertake in the quest to approximate body beautiful.

## Chapter 4

### Performing Female Heterosexuality:

The Teenage Body in Elisabeth Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine," Bonnie Burnard's "Crush," and Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge"

In the twenty-first century, Western teenage girls are in a double-bind: sexuality is freely visible and easily accessible via various media, yet female teenage sexuality is continually reported and discussed with implicit condemnation. For heterosexual teenaged women, to express emerging feelings of sexual maturity conflicts with social and familial pressures to remain chaste, or at least to appear to remain chaste. At the same time, heterosexual girls, like boys, are bombarded with a myriad of examples of how to perform their sexuality. Because of their exposure to such activities as sexting—the transmission of sexually explicit text or images (photos and videos) via electronic devices—and posting and tagging sexually explicit images on social networking sites using online services like Instagram and Facebook, young women quickly learn the avenues available to them in performing their burgeoning sexuality and what their hetero-male counterparts expect of their performances. In a period in our history when teenaged sexuality is wide-ranging, explicit, and visible, I focus on three short stories that depict a period when sexuality, particularly for teenage girls, was much less visible but no less innocent. Like today's teenagers, the female protagonists of these stories, all set in the mid-twentieth century, perceive and interpret the sexual social cues available to them. While teens today may learn how to perform their sexuality via the latest celebrity sex-tapes, the protagonists in these stories rely instead on familial input, literature, interactions with peers, and sexual instinct.

In previous chapters, I have explored the inherent power of the female body in Canadian women's short stories, particularly when characters' bodies transgress the ideal body beautiful aesthetic. By way of celebrating a spectrum of body forms—from unruliness to extreme compliance—these bodies speak their unbridled and fluid nature as the women characters attempt to perform social power through their bodies. In this chapter, I investigate the representation of the bodies of female teenage characters in Elisabeth Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine" (2003), Bonnie Burnard's "Crush" (1984; 1994),<sup>22</sup> and Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge" (2005; 2009).<sup>23</sup> Of importance to my analysis are the descriptions of problematic re-enactments of supposed female heterosexuality as well as of the uncontrollable urge to expose the self, particularly unbound breasts, in acts of both pressured and coerced nudity. My reading of these texts acknowledges the intergenerational condemnation of and inability to appreciate the sexual awakening of the teenage girls by family members. I analyze varying representations of female sexual awakening, especially levels of "appropriate" femininity in relation to self-confidence and self-approval and/or discomfort, unease, and shame. Of significant interest is the unspoken dichotomy surrounding female sexuality in general. To be a "good" girl conflicts with these characters' sexual feelings as well as the performed femininity that surrounds them. I argue that the protagonists in Burnard's "Crush," Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine," and Munro's "Wenlock Edge" all demonstrate a determination to expose their bodies to the hetero-male gaze because of their burgeoning sexuality and perceptions of ideal female heterosexuality. Whether pressured into nudity, or exposing themselves freely without restraint because of their own sexual curiosity and

---

<sup>22</sup> "Crush" first appeared in *NeWest Review* in 1984 and was subsequently published in Burnard's 1994 collection *Casino and Other Stories*.

<sup>23</sup> Munro's "Wenlock Edge" was first published in the December 5, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*. For my dissertation, I use the story as it was published in 2009 in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Canadian Women's Short Stories* selected and introduced by Lisa Moore.

pleasure, these nameless protagonists acquire a certain degree of agency from their behaviour. At the conclusion of each narrative, their performed sexuality—including nudity and sometimes self-stimulation—coalesces to bring a new level of agency to their actions and provides them with a greater sense of the inherent power of their bodies as well as a greater knowledge of the negative societal characteristics of female sexual maturity. These consequences include the inherent objectification of the female body through the masculine gaze and the shame that accompanies both female desire and female nudity if the woman's body does not align with societal ideals of body beautiful.

Regardless of the historical moment, transitioning from a girl to a young woman is fraught with mixed messages regarding sexuality. From girlhood to adolescence, young women negotiate social expectations and biological transformations. Like the adult women who surround them, they experience pressure on various fronts to comport themselves in ways deemed socially acceptable. A girl, like a grown woman, must be adept at altering her performance of femininity and sexuality depending on the situation and audience. For a familial audience she must be innocent and sweet; for the hetero-male gaze she must be spunky, sexy, and compliant. Like the paradoxes of anorexia explored by Analu Verbin and discussed in Chapter 3,<sup>24</sup> the adolescent girl's performance of femininity is also paradoxical; she inhabits a space that is restrictive in one sense, but limitless in another. An adolescent girl adapts her performance of femininity to societal and familial pressures or demands, while exploring a vast spectrum of possibilities about her sexual self. In her 2001 study *Young Women and the Body: A Feminist Sociology*, Liz Frost explores this transitional period of adolescence, especially the factors contributing to body hatred in Western young women. Of value to my own exploration of young females' performed

---

<sup>24</sup> In Chapter 3, I describe some of Verbin's work regarding the paradoxical nature of anorexia. To summarize, Verbin argues that femininity is a performance (39) and that anorectics, in their pursuit of the ideal feminine body, surpass the ideal and, in so doing, suppress the femaleness of their bodies.

sexuality and the body is Frost's discussion of the societal pressures regarding the performance of and the power structures associated with adolescence. Whether from family, romantic partners, or society in general, "[t]he messages offered to girls about themselves have little to do with being confident and comfortable with their sexuality or with being passionate and self-determining" (Frost 109). During this period of burgeoning sexuality, Frost argues, young women receive very little advice that encourages them to express sexuality or experience sex in a joyful manner, or that demonstrates the possibility of sexual power within a relationship. In the three short stories by Harvor, Burnard, and Munro, the protagonists are criticized by those of other generations as too young, too prudish, or too shamefully immodest. The three protagonists attempt to perform femininity from a place of sexual ignorance and a genuine lack of positive sexual female models.

Harvor's short story "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine" was first published in the *Best Canadian Stories* series in 2003 and was subsequently included in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Canadian Women's Short Stories*. As the title suggests, in Harvor's story there is a very limited window—an hour or perhaps a little more—for the protagonist to discover her sexual self through her reading of Proust and her intimate exchange with her brother's friend while her parents are out of the home visiting a dentist. The perspective is that of an adult woman who is remembering a time when she was teetering on the edge of sexual awakening at the age of thirteen. Of particular interest in this story are Harvor's allusions to Proust—for both plot development and as a literary device—at the beginning of the narrative. The intergenerational condemnation of sexual awakening that hangs over the entire narrative also warrants scrutiny, as well as the performativity of female heterosexuality evident in the actions of the protagonist. The movement from curious youngster playing "Doctor" with her siblings, to

young woman posing in a sexually suggestive manner for her brother's friend, culminates at narrative's end in explicit kissing and touching between the narrator and an older teenage boy. The protagonist's determination to appeal to his masculine gaze and her subsequent sexual arousal is juxtaposed against the omnipresent inter-generational disapproval of teenaged girls' sexual maturity and expression.

In an interview with Harvor for *Canadian Literature*, Anne Compton questions the thematic differences between Harvor's poetry and short fiction. Compton considers Harvor's short stories to be "glimpses into how the mind works: registering the present, remembering the past, sifting information" ("Theatre of the Body"). This is an apt description of how "One Whole Hour" begins, as the story opens with the protagonist in present time as an adult driving by a service station. She finds herself fascinated by a family taking shelter from the rain, especially the youngest of the children—a girl in a juvenile white butterfly sleeveless blouse and puffy lilac shorts (153). This image of the innocent-looking young girl prompts her own memories about herself as a girl on the cusp of sexual awakening, including "the absolute moodiness of being that young again: dull Monday morning ruined by rain. Also the games she had played on just such dim, rainy mornings under the blankets with her brothers. Tummie Touch. Doctor. Rubbies. Father and Mother" (153). The young girl produces in the protagonist an involuntary memory of her own experiences as a youngster, learning about sexual mores and roles by way of role-playing with her older brothers. In playing "Doctor," "Father and Mother," and other games, the siblings explored one another's bodies, an activity that most children perform in secret and away from the eyes of parents or authority figures, though such acts are considered normal child sexual behavior (Hornor 57). This remembrance of childhood sexual curiosity takes the protagonist to another involuntary memory, one in which even more forbidden sexual interest and arousal are

apparent. This second involuntary memory is the focus of Harvor's short story. The protagonist is perpetually performing a learned alluring self for the masculine gaze, reifying through her actions an inability to experience sexual agency.

Told from a third-person limited point of view, the short story describes the unnamed teen protagonist as she passes an afternoon at home with Eric, a friend of one of her older teenaged brothers, who lives in their home. Since her parents are visiting the dentist's office, the protagonist is free to do as she likes. This freedom, however, is curtailed by parental expectations regarding sexual innocence that infuse her thoughts and actions, as does her knowledge of the social mores of teen-girl sexuality, as she walks around her home, unsure of how to keep occupied during their absence. Since reading is considered a clandestine pastime at the protagonist's home and she has to "hide to read the books she was sure her mother wouldn't want her to read" (154), the protagonist selects Proust's second volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* from their parlour bookshelves. Like Harvor's protagonist, the fictional protagonist of Proust's series of books, Marcel, is struggling with a burgeoning sexuality. Sitting down studiously at her desk in her bedroom, the protagonist reads of the young Marcel as he spies on the homosexual encounter between the Baron de Charlus and the tailor Jupien. She reads that the tailor "stuck out his behind, posed himself with the coquetry that the orchid might have adopted on the providential arrival of the bee" (154), moving her to feel "a powerful throb of excitement" (154). Sexually aroused by the passage, the protagonist skips ahead to the description of Marcel overhearing the noises and sounds associated with a sexual act between the Baron and the tailor. Harvor's protagonist is stimulated by the passage, and the description of the sound

made her start to tick even though she was still seated at her desk; a sound that turned her into a ticking little time-bomb reading a book, she was sexually ticking,

regular ticks and then a series of throbs, and now and then she would feel the need to shrug sideways and squirm a little in her chair, then she would feel the need to shrug sideways—but in the opposite direction—then squirm in her chair again.

(155)

The literary excerpt creates a pleasurable sexual sensation, which the protagonist tries to prolong and enhance by rubbing her genitals on her chair; sex educator Jamye Waxman describes this action as an attempt at achieving a “pressure orgasm.” Unfulfilled, the protagonist tries another tactic by changing out of her clothes and putting on ones that are more revealing, including a pair of red shorts, a colour associated with passion. She then imitates the Proust excerpt before her full-length mirror: “she put down the book and stepped out of her jeans to pull on her red corduroy shorts and black T-shirt that was a little too tight for her, then went over to the long mirror on her closet door and stood next to it to study her body in profile. She stuck out her behind as the tailor had done and let her mouth fall open” (155). While the protagonist has learned this posture from the literature she has just read, the too-tight clothing meant to accentuate her physique is chosen for a particular audience: Eric, the teenage boy who lives with them. Choosing to wear close-fitting clothing is a learned behaviour most likely impressed upon the protagonist by fellow teens and the social community around her.

Perhaps the most telling passage in regards to a gendered performance of sexuality is the depiction of the protagonist as she attempts to model and project a sexually appealing self to the young man who may be gazing down on her from above. Sexually excited from reading the excerpt in Proust’s novel, the protagonist decides to venture outside of her home and into the yard in order to playfully enact sexually appealing poses for a specific hetero-male gaze: “She went down and out, longing to be seen, to be admired, longing for Eric to come to his window



and look down and see her. She let the back door slam behind her and walked over to the fence to sit under the tree, then posed her legs and leaned back on her hands in a way that made her breasts aim perfectly up” (155). The “longing” that she feels is to be “seen,” not only recognized by the male but “admired,” appreciated for her ability to exhibit her womanliness. She goes outdoors to perform for Eric, not under duress as occurs in Munro’s “Wenlock Edge” but instead full of sexual excitement. She poses under the tree in a manner that mimics the images found in male-oriented centerfold publications such as *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, and *Hustler* (Yalom 188), images of “playmates” with arched backs and chests proudly exhibited; this posed confidence has most likely been acquired via social and visual culture. However, she soon discovers discomfort and unease in posing for Eric:

But after a few minutes had passed, it felt too weird to be on display, especially since she didn’t know if Eric was even bothering to look, and her legs were beginning to get restless too—she would draw one of them up, then bring it down to draw up the other and toss back her hair. But she soon tired of this and so she stood up to slap at the bits of grass that had attached themselves to the back of her shorts, and it was while she was hitting at herself that a whistle—thrilling, piercing, sure of itself, male—came down from above. (155)

The protagonist finds her postures and poses physically uncomfortable and the act itself “weird,” suggesting her relative inexperience and, also, the artificiality and lack of power in performing for the male gaze. Her physical self, “on display” for this teenage boy, is peculiar not because of its inappropriateness, but because she is unsure as to whether or not her performance is reaching its intended captive audience. Transitioning from a static centerfold-type pose into a rhythmic and repetitive moving in one knee followed by the other, all the while drawing attention to her

hair by tossing it back, further indicates her knowledge of which body parts to highlight—breasts, legs, hair—and which actions to demonstrate—pointing the breasts upwards, moving the legs up and down—in order to fulfill the appropriate markers of sexuality and the sex act for the hetero-male gaze. Her aim is to titillate her audience, but when recognition of her performance does not occur, she grows bored and ends her display. It is only when she is slapping and hitting her posterior to remove grass that she finally receives recognition of a performance well done from her audience in the form of an approving whistle. The slapping of her posterior could also be interpreted as a self-punitive act for behaving in such a sexually explicit fashion. Described as “thrilling, piercing, sure of itself, male,” the whistle confirms the power relationship of this interaction between these two teens, with the male controlling the protagonist’s sense of achievement. Only after his vocalized approval does she consider her performance to be a success.

Finally achieving the desired result, unmistakable in Eric’s approving whistle, the protagonist must choose how to respond to his gesture. Her response, or in this case non-response, further demonstrates her observed knowledge of “appropriate” female sexual behaviour by way of peers: “She didn’t need to look up, she knew who was whistling, but she had seen older girls act aloof when they were being whistled at and so she decided to act aloof too” (155-56). This learned response to behave detached, “aloof” from such overt male sexual interest, even though she has deliberately provoked it, provides further evidence of the protagonist’s knowledge of sexual scripts, in which the female is passive in response to male sexual attention. Young females then are caught in a double-bind scenario; to perform an appropriate femininity, they are compelled to appear innocent and virginal to parents, educators, and community, but they must also be sexually appealing for a specific young man’s pleasure

while aloof to his interest. As Frost comments, “girls are caught up in contradictory expectations that they will be, for example, ‘nice’ and ‘good’ but also attractive and ‘sexy’” (108). Wanting to achieve a successful performance of feminine sexuality, the protagonist decides to turn on her heels and coolly head indoors, maintaining an air of feigned indifference to the catcall.

Once indoors, the protagonist is at loose ends: aimlessly smelling books, banging ivory chopsticks on furniture, running her fingers along the piano keys, turning lights on and off. She wants to preserve her performed aloofness, but at the same time to act on the sexual feelings that have arisen through reading Proust and hearing Eric’s whistle. Only when she sees a print of a Hogarth painting that hangs in her parents’ home (Fig. 2) is she inspired to make another advance towards Eric, with a feigned innocence: “[A]s she was passing under the poster of the rosy *Shrimp Girl* she had an inspiration: she could ask Eric to play Scrabble with her. And so she got out the box of letter tiles, and after peeking at herself one more time in one of the downstairs mirrors she went up the stairs with the Scrabble board pressed to her breasts like a school book” (156). Stirred by the painting, the protagonist decides to take matters into her own hands and finds a pretext to interact with Eric under the guise of playing a board game.



Fig. 2. William Hogarth, *The Shrimp Girl*, The National Gallery.

Harvor's use of a painting by Hogarth (1697-1764) is particularly fitting in this story since the artist's work is renowned for social criticism related to consumerism and classism (Craske 6-13), and since he published a treatise on aesthetics, *The Analysis of Beauty*, in 1752. In this treatise Hogarth's ideas concerning women's beauty, as presented to and for the masculine gaze, are explored in detail. Art historian Mark Hallett describes Hogarth's ruminations on beauty as particularly male-centred: "The language of aesthetics is an unashamedly predatory and

eroticized one, in which visual pleasure is related most closely to the perspectives of the wandering masculine eye, pursuing the alluring forms and outlines of the ever-elusive female body” (253). Just as Hogarth understands female beauty as visually pleasurable to the male audience, Harvor’s protagonist is beginning to learn the sexual politics being played out between her and Eric (and men in general). In gazing at the image of the girl, catching “the street-seller’s vivacious smile as she turns to look back over her shoulder” (Hallett 250), the protagonist summons her courage and heads up the stairs.

With the Scrabble board pressed to her chest “like a school book,” the protagonist wants to maintain a semblance of innocence. Her motives, however, are not innocent. She is well-versed in the role she must assume in the interaction between herself and Eric in order to perform an ideal passive sexuality, though not entirely sure of what will happen between the two of them. As Frost details in her work on young female sexuality, the socially accepted instigator of a sexual encounter is the male, not the female: “To instigate sexual pleasure, perhaps even to demonstrate sexual pleasure, seem still to be forbidden roles for girls to take” (118). The protagonist, then, correctly executes a delicate balance between instigating contact, while maintaining an air of innocence. Like the *Shrimp Girl* selling her wares, the protagonist will offer herself again to the male gaze. As she knocks at the door, she describes the “squeak of bedsprings” (156), how his face “looked flushed,” and the “curious smell in his room: dirty socks and something else. Cheese, she thought” (156). It is clear to the reader that Eric has been masturbating after watching the protagonist from the bedroom window.

In regards to the sense of smell, Harvor notes in her interview with Compton how she favours this sensation in her fiction: “I think smells do belong much more in prose. . . . They seem more ordinary, more connected with the body” (“Theatre of the Body”). The protagonist

registers what she considers only a peculiar smell. Naively oblivious to Eric's self-pleasuring, she suggests a game of Scrabble, but when she enters Eric's room he "smiled at her oddly, then told her that he knew how to play a much better game. . . . [T]hen he was saying that his game was called Grabble, and that the first rule of this game was that she had to guess what number he was thinking of" (156). As the protagonist plays along with Eric's suggested game, she understands all too well that she is not supposed to guess correctly: "Of course the whole point was to guess wrong. Even she knew that. You won by losing" (157). The sexual economy of winners—men—and losers—women—is striking, adding credence to Frost's argument regarding the power-play within teenage heterosexual couplings. When Eric begins roughhousing with the protagonist, another instance where game-playing is suggested by the male in order to instigate physical contact with the female, she maintains her performed innocence, but plays along just the same: "She wasn't really all that surprised when he shoved her (but jokingly) against the wall by his door. . . . But this time, instead of batting him away, she pouted up at him, feeling insolent and plump in every part of her body. His hand went lower down then, and right away began a slow and almost unbearably tremendous massage while taunts from her childhood began to sing themselves up inside her head" (157). This delicate give-and-take between virtuousness and acting as a guilty accomplice demonstrates again the contradictory pressures that young girls like the protagonist feel to achieve and maintain in their performed sexuality. It is Eric who initiates the intimate "massage," suggesting that the protagonist has little idea of her sexual self or self-pleasure, while the taunts are telling evidence that she knows that what she is doing is supposedly forbidden.

The protagonist's playful re-enactment of the hetero-male driven sexual ideal—posing for the masculine gaze in alluring fashion, playing coy to the male's sexual aggression—

culminates with the protagonist and Eric enjoying a heated sexual exchange in his bedroom.

While Eric grinds himself against the protagonist, she feels a sexual drunkenness and is almost anesthetised by Eric's actions:

And by the time his hand, and then his whole body, had rubbed hard against her for however long they'd imagined it would take for her mother's appointment at the dentist's to be over, the corduroy ribs had been rubbed off the fabric of her shorts until it had become—but she didn't see this until later—as see-through and hazy as a red veil. But while it was all still going on she was only drunk on what was happening. (157)

The corduroy red shorts—symbolic for their red colour and veil-like appearance—do not fare well in this sexual exchange. The colour red, indicative of passion and illicit sex, and the veil, a symbol of female modesty, are juxtaposed as a reminder of the double-bind as experienced by the protagonist. The outside pressures of chastity fall to the wayside as the protagonist revels in the pleasure she feels rubbing against Eric.

Eric initiates another level of intimacy in motioning the protagonist to his bed: “then he was starting to walk her backwards toward his bed—and she wanted him to, she wanted to go wherever his guiding hand pushed her, but at the same time she was worried that once they were lying down she wouldn't at all know what to do with her own hands—when they heard the warning gouge of tires in gravel” (157-58). Yet again it is the male who initiates the development of the sexual encounter, moving toward the possibility of intercourse. The protagonist is indeed a willing participant, as she continues to allow him to steer the interaction, his “guiding hand” pushing her along. She expects Eric's sexual control of the interaction, but is particularly apprehensive about her own performance. She has no concept of the role she is to

play during intercourse, even questioning what she is supposed to do with her hands. Now beginning to be uneasy with her performance, the protagonist is rescued from her dilemma by the noise of her parents' return from the dentist.

Yet again, Eric takes control of the situation and instructs the protagonist to leave his room. Eric is very much aware of the social inappropriateness of the situation as he is an older teenager and she only thirteen years old, and he does not want the protagonist's parents to find them together in his room: "Eric was talking to her, he was saying in a low voice, 'Go to your room now, hurry ...' and so she did, but her heart was by now violently beating down where the ticking had been and she was feeling sullen because they'd been interrupted and so she thrashed around on her bed trying to make one of her hands be Eric's hand, but her hand was too small (and also too much hers)" (158). Without the male physically present to provide stimulation, the protagonist cannot achieve sexual climax. Frustrated with her own lack of sexual knowledge, she yearns to have Eric's hands touching her as opposed to her own. As Frost states, "The ambivalent attitudes in families towards young women's sexuality would tend to foster discomfort and unease, rather than confidence and pleasure" (130). There is no sexual confidence within her exchange with Eric, only a resignation to follow his lead.

As the final scene in the story makes clear, the protagonist's family does little to instill any kind of self-assuredness or sexual self-confidence in her as she transitions into sexual maturity. In fact, the mother in particular seems shocked by her daughter's burgeoning sexuality. As the story culminates with a description of that evening's family meal (with the protagonist's parents taking note of Eric's absence from the dinner table but not linking that absence to the afternoon spent alone with their daughter), the protagonist's mother asks her what she did in the house while they were at the dentist. She responds by telling her family that she was busy



reading a book by “Marcel Proust” (*sic* 158). Her mother is shocked by her daughter’s reading choice, and asks her husband, “Don’t you think that a girl of thirteen is too young to be reading Proust?” (158). Her reaction speaks to Frost’s theory of intergenerational condemnation of a teenage girl’s sexual sense of self, even though the mother seriously underestimates her daughter’s acts of sexual exploration. Frost argues, “Families are clearly part of the system of circulation and regeneration of meaning. When small girls become young women, the family’s relationship may also change in relation to them. It may, for example, become highly restrictive. . . . Parents are afraid that girls will ‘get into trouble’, and . . . that invariably means sexual trouble” (127-28). The mother is not impressed by her daughter’s literary interests, even though she cannot pronounce Proust correctly, but instead focuses on the possible transmission of sexual education and ignores the obvious: her sons and their friend Eric. While both peers and sexual instinct push the protagonist toward sexual maturation, the familial input works to counter those factors via the indirect scolding of her choice of literature. Little sexual agency is acquired by the protagonist throughout the course of the narrative. With no intergenerational support for a healthy sexual self, and with the expectation that a male will control the sexual encounter, the protagonist finds little pleasure in her own body and is ultimately unable to self-stimulate to orgasm. In one whole hour (or even more), the protagonist learns that her sexual interest is to be hidden because it is shameful, and that others, specifically family members, will make fun of and laugh at her burgeoning sexuality.

While Harvor’s short story focuses on broad familial input, as well as the effects of literary sources and interactions with peers on the sexual instinct of the protagonist, Burnard’s “Crush” examines more closely the mother-daughter relationship in regards to the teaching of sexual mores. Of the three short stories examined in this chapter, “Crush” is the preeminent

example of the inherent power of female nudity, both to attract and arouse the hetero-male gaze, and as vehicle to produce agency for the exhibitionist. Moreover, the relationship between mother and daughter in “Crush” demonstrates, more intently than Harvor’s short story, the familial pressures to remain chaste outlined by Frost, including the notion of young girls being “out of control” in their sexuality and needing protection from predatory males looking to take advantage (124). As Burnard’s story demonstrates, a young woman on the cusp of sexual maturity can in fact take pleasure in her femininity and sexuality. Although the female teenage body provokes anxiety in those who surround the young woman—parent(s), heterosexual males, and the community at large—Burnard’s protagonist feels a strong desire to expose her physical sexual maturity to a particular male gaze and relishes in that expression of her femaleness and femininity. According to Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, “the body is not necessarily a source of anxiety for girls and young women. It can also be a very positive site of self-expression, identity-creation and enjoyment” (157). While the protagonist in Harvor’s short story experiences anxiety regarding her sexual self, so much so that she cannot achieve orgasm through self-stimulation after her encounter with Eric, the protagonist in Burnard’s short story persists in finding her sexual self as a positive force of expression, despite her mother’s attempts to make her feel shame and give in to the intergenerational pressure of chastity until marriage as the only pathway to happiness.

Burnard’s short story begins with a description of the protagonist painting her family’s kitchen cupboards on a sweltering summer day. Narrated from a third-person omniscient perspective, the story highlights the protagonist as physically mature and sexually alluring: “Her summer-blond ponytail and her young brown shoulders are hidden in the cupboards, and a stranger coming into the kitchen, seeing only the rounded buttocks in the terrycloth shorts and

the long well-formed legs, might think he was looking at part of a woman” (3). This description highlights the protagonist’s womanly body and even foreshadows the eventual arrival of Adam, the bread man, who will bear witness to her sexual allure. Adam is no stranger to the protagonist, however, as we learn in the second paragraph. In fact, she babysits his children on a regular basis: “She takes the job because of him, for the chance to ride alone with him in the dark on the way home. She thinks she’s in love” (3). From the outset of the story, the protagonist’s crush on Adam is plain because she is the focalizer of the first part of the story and the last part as well. She remembers the image of him playing in the surf, an image of a body “she will remember when she is seventy and has forgotten others” (4). At the same time, she feels the intensity of the heat in the kitchen: “She leans back out of the cupboards, unbuttons her blouse and takes it off, tossing it toward the table. It floats down over the dishes. She wants to take off her bra, but doesn’t” (4). Without missing a beat, her mother chastises her daughter’s decision to remove her top: “You be careful Adam doesn’t catch you in that state, young lady. He’ll be coming through that door with the bread any minute” (4). This first vocal interaction between mother and daughter depicts the mature woman providing advice to a member of the younger generation on “proper” social conduct for women.

In Burnard’s short story, bread is used as metaphor for fertility, reproduction, and life. The bread in the shape of the phallus is Adam’s offering to the protagonist. Similar to the allusion to the Archangel threatening the Virgin Mother with fullness in Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs,” Adam’s “bread” is a symbol of virility and the possibility of sexual impropriety. There is also the possibility that the character Adam is an allusion to the Garden of Eden described in the Book of Genesis, from which the first man, Adam, along with Eve, is expelled for eating fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge. This allusion to forbidden fruit aligns with

the mother's concerns about protecting her daughter's sexual honour, unmistakable by the warning "you be careful." The protagonist, on the other hand, is eager to have Adam see her body as womanly and feminine. The mother continues the dialogue with her daughter, enquiring if the daughter has chosen a bathing suit that she is to receive as a reward for helping to paint the kitchen cabinets. About the suit, the mother states, "It's time you started to think about modesty. It's beginning to matter" (4). The protagonist, however, is not concerned with modesty or covering her developing feminine body. Quite the opposite: the protagonist has chosen a bathing suit that in all likelihood shows off a goodly amount of flesh: "She has picked out her suit. It's the one on the dummy in the window downtown, the one the boys gather around. She knows she won't be allowed to have it. Mrs. Stewart in the ladies shop wouldn't even let her try it on, said it wasn't suitable for her. But it is. It's the one she wants" (5). This particular bathing suit is coveted for the masculine gazes it draws, evident in the boys who flock to the shop window to ogle the dummy wearing it. Members of the older female generation—the mother and Mrs. Stewart—both try to steer the protagonist toward a bathing suit that will not draw masculine gazes to the same extent. As Frost documents, young women, like the protagonist, understand all too well that their physical economy is one of a sexual nature: "Fully imbibed then, with the consciousness of their own designation as, first and foremost a visual, sexualised body, it is in this arena that girls rebel" (123). The protagonist is eager to rebel against the older generations' not so gentle push towards modesty. She wants to flaunt her femininity in the sexy bathing suit and to remove her clothes in the hopes that Adam will arrive with his "bread" and see her unclothed.

Once the protagonist's mother has finished her ironing, she instructs her daughter to put her blouse back on so that she can go shop for meat; her promise to return with a cold pop for her

daughter is a strategic gesture by the mother to cool off the daughter, figuratively as well as literally. But once the mother is out the door, the protagonist finds a more provocative way to cool off by running an ice cube over her body: “She raises her hand to her forehead and rubs the ice against her skin, back into her hair, down her cheek, down over her throat. The ice-cube is small now, just a round lump. Her hand is cold and wet. His hand was wet when he danced with her at the Firemen’s dance” (5-6). In moving an ice cube over her body, the protagonist is able both to relieve her body from the heat, and to perform a provocative action that is imagined for the titillation of the hetero-male. The sensation provokes a remembrance of a past event for the protagonist. Feeling the sensation of her cold wet hand, the protagonist recollects a particular dance that she shared with Adam. Remembering in her mind’s eye the sensations as he pressed his hand to her back and “moved her the way he wanted her to move” (6), she abruptly ends her daydreaming and wonders how close Adam is to arriving to deliver his bread.

After this remembrance the protagonist makes a decision. She decides to undress so that Adam can see her breasts. Wanting Adam to see her as a woman, and not “young stuff” (6), as Adam’s friends referred to the protagonist at the Fireman’s dance, she decides to prove her physical maturity via nudity: “She undoes the top button of her blouse, then the next, and the next, and the next. It slips from her shoulders and lands in a heap on the floor. She unfastens her bra, eases it down over her brown arms, drops it” (6). Left wearing only her terrycloth shorts, the protagonist returns to painting the kitchen cupboards. With Adam’s sudden appearance in the kitchen, the protagonist can finally exhibit her breasts to him: “She comes down from the chair, steps over the heap of her clothes and stands in front of him, as still as the surface of a hot summer lake. ‘Jesus,’ he says. ‘I wanted to show you,’ she says” (6-7). Coming down from the chair, the protagonist symbolically removes her corporeality from an untouchable pedestal of

virginity. Moving directly in front of Adam, and declaring that she wants him to see her breasts, makes her message clear. She is sexually attracted to him, and wants Adam to feel the same way about her. As discussed in the chapter on representations of the mastectomized body, feminist theorist Iris Marian Young posits breasts as objects of cultural construction of ideal femininity within a male-dominated society. Breasts function as signifiers of womanliness, both for the woman and for others (76).<sup>25</sup> In exhibiting her breasts to Adam, the protagonist declares her womanliness. Shocked, Adam backs out of the house and symbolically forgets to leave the day's bread, "two loaves of white and one whole wheat" (7), which can be interpreted as akin to the description of male genitalia made by the protagonist Ann in "Eros" as "meat and two veg" (Shields 209). As Adam leaves the kitchen, the protagonist can hear the sound of her mother's voice approaching the house, "uneasy, and unnaturally loud" (7).

At this point in the short story, the narrative shifts to focalize on Adam and his reaction to seeing the semi-nude protagonist. Adam's first response as he drives away from the house is one of shock, disbelief, and fear. He is chiefly concerned about the protagonist's mother and whether or not she will blame Adam for her daughter's nudity, or worse still, phone Adam's wife to discuss the matter. In a panic, Adam decides to drive his bread truck outside city limits and park it on a side road next to a farmer's field of corn. He ruminates on his up-until-now innocent relationship with the protagonist, professing his ignorance about the sexual undertones of her past actions. Though he insists to himself that he "can't picture her in a bathing suit" when she was helping him teach his children how to swim (7), he now "leans back in the seat, unbuttons

---

<sup>25</sup> In Young's "The Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling," she argues that breasts are objects, signifiers of a woman's femininity and sexuality. In a culture, such as ours, that fetishizes breasts, the masculine gaze evaluates a woman "according to standards that she had no part in establishing and that remain outside her control" (153). Young's claims regarding the cultural construction of breasts are also discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

his shirt and lights a Player's" (8), indicative of sexual arousal on his part as a result of her recent exhibition of her breasts. The smoke from his cigarette provokes the image of the protagonist's breasts to return to the forefront of his thoughts: "It's been a long time since he's seen fresh, smooth, hard breasts. Not centrefold stuff, not even as nice as his wife before the kids, but nice just the same. Yeah. Nice. He shifts around in his seat. Damn" (8). Adam is aroused by the image of the girl's young breasts—fresh, smooth, hard—and attempts to rationalize her exhibitionist behaviour: "It's like she just discovered them. Or maybe she got tired of being the only one who knew. Now he knows and what the hell's he supposed to do about it?" (8). Very much aware of the social mores surrounding interactions between a married man and a female minor, Adam understands the protagonist's body as off limits, yet the image of her naked torso returns to his mind's eye two more times. Again Adam attempts to rationalize the protagonist's exhibitionism, proffering the notion of her uncontrolled hormones as the cause of her nakedness: "She could be crazy. She's the age to be crazy. But he remembers her eyes on him and whatever it was they were saying, it had sweet all to do with crazy" (9). Neither a gesture expressing novelty nor the actions of an unbalanced young woman, the exhibitionism, along with the protagonist's eyes, speaks her sexual attraction to him. The naked breasts are an offering, indicating her adult sexual availability.

For a third and final time, the image of the protagonist's breasts return to the forefront of Adam's memory. No longer able to push the image away or rationalize the sexual innuendo of the protagonist's actions, Adam allows himself to fantasize about her body:

Back the picture comes again, and he closes his eyes and the breasts stay with him, safe behind the lids of his eyes. He can see a narrow waist, and squared shoulders. He hears words, just a few, although he doesn't know what they are,

and he feels a gentleness come into his hands, he feels his cupped hands lift toward her skin and then he hears a racket near his feet and he opens his eyes to see a wretched crow on the open floor of the truck beside the bread tray; it's already clawed its way through the waxed paper, it's already buried its beak. (9)

Remembering the image of her naked torso, he imagines cupping his hands toward the protagonist's breasts only to be awakened from his reverie by a crow hungrily consuming the bread on the floor of his truck. Symbolically, this event can be read as another cautionary warning against unrestricted sexuality. The bread, here again as an image of fertility and reproduction, is now a stand-in for female sexuality. Soft, moist, and inviting, the bread is penetrated by the scavenger crow whose burying beak represents the male appendage. This middle section of the short story then functions as a parable of sorts, suggesting that to fantasize is one thing, but to act on those desires, to reach out for the forbidden breasts, is dangerous indeed.

In the third section of the short story, the focalization moves from Adam to the mother, the setting returning to the kitchen, and the action to the mother's reaction to her daughter's exhibitionism. The mother enters the kitchen as her daughter is buttoning her blouse back into place and deduces what has just happened. She is furious with her daughter: "This is not a conversation she has prepared herself for. This is not a conversation she ever expected to have. She cannot stop herself from looking at the girl's young body, cannot stop the memory of her own body and the sudden remorse she feels knowing it will never come back to her" (10). Unlike the mother in Harvor's short story, the mother in "Crush" realizes the sexual awakening of her teenage daughter, even though her daughter's behaviour catches her off guard. The mother seems to understand the excitement associated with a developing sexual self, but focuses on the fleeting



and ephemeral nature of passion. Wanting to protect her daughter from the social consequences of acting on sexual urges, the mother tries to explain to her daughter which sexual behaviour is acceptable for a young woman—none until marriage—by recounting her own sexual feelings as a young woman:

I had a crush on your father. That's how it started with us, because I had a crush on him. He was only a little older than me but I think it's the same. I don't know why it should happen with you so young, but I'm sure it's the same. The difference is I didn't take my clothes off for him. And he wasn't married. Do you understand? It's wrong to feel that way about someone if he's married and it's wrong to take your clothes off. (11)

The mother's speech is focused squarely on what is right—her own chaste behaviour when she was a young woman—versus what is wrong—her daughter's transgressive exhibitionism for a married man. In chastising her daughter for having a crush on Adam, the mother attacks her daughter's self-confident act of revealing her breasts, because the act is considered shamefully inappropriate by the mother. Frost expands on this concept of appropriateness, suggesting that Western culture constructs women as passive partners in heterosexual relationships: "Young women, then, are offered versions of themselves in which their sexual pleasure, and indeed protection, must be instigated within a 'loving' relationship and by the male partner" (119). The protagonist's mother in Burnard's story certainly believes in this concept of socially acceptable female heterosexuality. Her daughter's act is thus doubly shocking as it is instigated by her daughter and outside the purviews of a "loving" married relationship.

Once the mother squarely outlines the right and wrong ways for young women to exhibit their sexual interest, she shames her daughter for behaving as she has for the eyes of an older

married man: “You won’t be babysitting for them any more. He’ll tell his wife and they’ll have a good laugh about it. You’ve made a fool of yourself” (11). Shaming the protagonist is another tactic the mother employs in order to remedy what she considers to be her daughter’s unruly sexual behaviour. This humiliation is intended to make her feel wrong to have acted on her sexual desires. The shaming words are meant, just as Frost argues, as a protection for girls, both from the hetero-male and from themselves: “Girls are seen as needing to be protected, both from their perceived tendencies to be too emotional and out of control, and from being taken advantage of. This protection, or ‘policing’, is undertaken by boys, friends, schools, families” (124). In “Crush,” this policing falls on the shoulders of the mother, as the protagonist’s father is absent from the narrative. In fact, with the exception of the male gaze on the protagonist’s breast, there is no male-female interaction in Burnard’s short story, but there is both male and female focalization. “Appropriate” sexual conduct is communicated from the mother to the daughter, with no opportunity for open dialogue between the two, evident in the one-sided nature of the mother’s diatribe towards the daughter.

The protagonist remains completely silent in response to her mother’s discourse, as the mother extols further the “appropriate” Western sexual customs, citing control of libido as of utmost importance for a girl of her age: “Women have this feeling so they will marry, so they will have children. It’s like a grand plan. And you’ve got to learn to live within that plan. There will be a young man for you, it won’t be long. Maybe five years. That’s all. You’ve got to learn to control this thing, this feeling, until that young man is there for you” (11). The mother places ultimate importance on a woman comporting herself within a fairly narrowly prescribed female heterosexual role: sex within marriage in order to produce children. With heavy use of euphemisms—“this thing, this feeling”—the mother advises her daughter to “control” the sexual

drive she is feeling and acting on. If left unmanaged, if performed or acted upon outside of marriage, she implies, her daughter's sexual self will be wasted. The mother stresses that the daughter will not find a husband, and will be unable to follow a socially respectable route of sexual comportment:

If you don't control it, you will waste it, bit by bit, and there won't be a young man, not to marry. And they'll take it from you, any of them, because they can't stop themselves from taking it. It's your responsibility not to offer it. You just have to wait, wait for the one young man and you be careful who he is, you think about it good and hard then you marry him and then you offer it. (12)

This excerpt from the mother's speech exemplifies the belief that men have uncontrollable sexual urges, and that women should manage and guard their own sexual desires until the appropriate time: marriage. Frost analyzes this concept of sexual control, arguing that Western society limits young women's sexuality, body, and libido for heterosexual coupling, and more specifically, in order to sexually please males: "In sexual encounters, then, as in other areas of their lives, young women should be controlled, self-disciplining and passive. Their bodies could let them down at any moment. They must produce a feminised appearance and the 'correct' degree of contained feeling. Their bodies are for the fulfilment of the desire of and for pleasure of the man" (120). The protagonist's exhibitionist actions challenge the socio-sexual mores of the mother, as the teen does not perform her sexual-self with the "correct" degree of restraint. Moreover, the protagonist's actions affect the mother's own sense of self as a mothering figure: "She feels barren. She is not a mother any more, not in the same way. It is as if the girl's undressing has wiped them both off the face of the earth" (12). Unable to contain her daughter's sexual libido, evident in the exhibition by the daughter of her breasts, the mother feels a sense of

failure; neither she, nor her daughter, has been able to abide by the sexual social dictates, stripping them both metaphorically “off the face of the earth.” The daughter’s act also indicates her move toward adulthood, thus negating the mother in a second way. The daughter’s performance and the mother’s inability to help guide her daughter to control her libido render the mother feeling as though she has failed; she waited too long to impress upon her daughter the need to contain her sexuality.

For a final time, the focalization of the narrative shifts to the protagonist, as she flees the displeasure of her mother and runs to the outskirts of town. Just as Adam drives away to the outskirts of town in order to collect his thoughts, the protagonist settles herself in a ditch on a grid road to think over her transgressive act, and the reactions of both Adam and her mother to her exhibitionism: “She knows she’s ruined it, knows the babysitting days are over. Not because he was embarrassed. He wasn’t embarrassed, he was afraid. It’s the first time she’s ever made anyone afraid. She will find a way to tell him that she didn’t mean to scare him” (12-13). While the protagonist’s mother is fretting over her inability to help her daughter remain virtuous until marriage, the protagonist turns her attention to the audience of her exhibition and his reaction to her performance. She worries that Adam was frightened by her act and not, as she had wanted, sexually interested. As examined previously, Frost describes Western culture’s axiom of the passive and controlled sexuality of young women. The protagonist’s display of her breasts conflicts with this image reported by Frost, and may prove difficult to explain should the mother believe, as Adam fears, that he provoked her nudity. The intergenerational condemnation for her inappropriate performance of female sexuality does not ultimately intimidate the protagonist, as she is aware of “that stuff about holding back and then getting married some day, she knows all about that. That’s what all the women do, and it’s likely what she’ll end up doing because there

doesn't seem to be any way to do anything else. Except maybe once in a while. If she can learn not to scare people" (13). This passage confirms that the protagonist understands the socio-sexual implications of her exhibitionism, and that her actions defy sanctioned sexual customs and economy for young women. It may be *de rigueur* to remain chaste until marriage, but the protagonist seems willing to explore her sexual-self outside those purviews. That said, she is only willing to do so if she can learn to harness her sexual power in such a way that the audience, here Adam, is receptive to the performance as one that is sexually exciting and not socially or morally terrifying.

At narrative's end, the protagonist does in fact take comfort in her body and the sexual power that it holds. Frost describes how many young women experience a sense of trepidation regarding their sexual desires: "Girls may well experience fears of being out of control, of being overwhelmed with physical appetites" (121). Such fears, however, do not seem to worry the protagonist, who, in the final page, revels in fantasizing about Adam's body and their exchange in the kitchen: "She feels absolutely alone and she likes it. She thinks about his back and his dark thighs and about standing there in the kitchen facing him. It's the best feeling she's ever had. She won't give it up. She crosses her arms in front of her, puts one hand over each small breast and she knows she isn't wrong about this feeling. It is something she will trust, from now on" (13). The differences between the protagonists of Harvor's "One Whole Hour" and "Crush" once they are outside the male gazes are striking. While the protagonist in "Crush" thrashes about on her own bed unsuccessfully trying to make her own hand mimic that of Eric's, the protagonist in "Crush" relishes her solitude and can easily fantasize about Adam's body as she cups her own breasts. In the absence of the male, the protagonist in "Crush" is able to experience sexual agency. Frost questions this relationship between the body and sexual pleasure, asking of a

young woman, “Does the discovery of her own body as a source of sexual pleasure introduce opportunities to feel more associated with and generally more at ease with her body? (116). Although her sexual exhibitionism strikes fear into Adam, the protagonist of Burnard’s story feels confident in her body and the feelings she experiences. Having been chastised by her mother for her actions, which fall outside socio-sexual customs, her exhibition nevertheless brings about a greater sense of the inherent power of her female body and her sexual self.

In Alice Munro’s “Wenlock Edge,” the protagonist, like the unnamed female protagonists in Burnard’s “Crush” and Harvor’s “One Whole Hour,” exposes her body to a specific male gaze. However, Munro’s protagonist is not viewed by a peer as is the case in “One Whole Hour,” or by an unsuspecting but desired married man as in “Crush,” but instead by an elderly and repulsive voyeuristic man named Arthur Purvis. Whereas the protagonists in both “Crush” and “One Whole Hour” are eager to pose in a sexually suggestive manner, the protagonist in “Wenlock Edge” is shamed into removing her clothes by a female second party. Munro’s short story also differs in its investigation of the sexual economy of young females by exploring the complex relationship between sexual pleasure and comfort with one’s body, particularly the relationship between food, body, and the sexual self. While Burnard’s “Crush” uses bread as a sexual symbol of fertility, Munro’s short story uses food and its restriction as a problematic form of reaction to sexual control. This exploration of the relationship between food, body, and sexual agency is confounded further in Munro’s short story by the interjection into the narrative of a foil for the protagonist. With the protagonist performing the sexual “good” girl, and Nina, the foil, the sexual “bad” girl, Munro is able to investigate both constructions of female sexuality in Western culture. Whereas Harvor’s protagonist navigates within the confines of societal expressions of female heterosexuality by posing as a pinup girl and playing passive female in the

sexual encounter, and Burnard's protagonist defies socio-sexual conventions by exhibiting her naked breasts to a married man, Munro's protagonist is coerced into temporarily rejecting her "bookworm" persona and social decorum regarding nudity, in order to dine completely nude for the benefit of a geriatric male gazer. As Joanna Luft notes, in Munro's story "the narrator's body doubles as a book that Mr. Purvis reads and as food that he eats" (111), a doubling that ultimately causes the protagonist to experience feelings of devastating shame.

Food and its overindulgence or restriction is established at the beginning of the narrative as the unnamed narrator—a university-aged woman—has dinner with her mother's younger cousin, Ernie Botts. Every other Sunday Ernie takes the narrator to dinner at the same expensive restaurant on Dundas Street where she always orders "the most exotic offering on the menu" (220). The narrator's experience with the dessert cart is strategic, as is her fasting the following day: "I took a long time choosing, like a five-year-old trying to decide between flavors of ice cream, and then on Monday I had to fast all day, to make up for such gorging" (220). The protagonist-narrator compares her actions of choosing dessert to that of a toddler; in the presence of Ernie, a man who holds no sexual appeal whatsoever for the protagonist, she performs her femininity in a child-like fashion, hemming and hawing and overindulging in sweets. Once away from the male gaze of Ernie, the narrator restricts her food consumption to realign her body with social conventions of female "body beautiful" (Orbach, *Bodies* 3).<sup>26</sup> She experiences no uncontrollable urge to exhibit her body to Ernie, or to any man for that matter.

The narrator's lifestyle in regards to work, food, and sex are in complete opposition to those of her roommate, Nina, at the rooming house where they share the attic space. Whereas the

---

<sup>26</sup> Orbach uses the term "body beautiful" to illustrate the democratisation of beauty, which is presented in Western culture as "fun, desirable and easily accessible"(3). Orbach argues that societal and cultural discourses of the perfectibility of the body have homogenized the female body ideal: a slim aesthetic with ample breasts (3). See Chapter 3 for a detailed analysis of Orbach's use of the term "body beautiful."

narrator eats and works at the college cafeteria (clearing plates and wiping down tables) and has no masculine love interest, Nina informs the narrator of a lurid and unseemly past, filled with illegitimate children, an abortion, and various love interests, one of whom is paying for her to audit courses at the college: “Hearing about Nina’s life made me feel like a simpleton” (226), reveals the narrator. The differences between the narrator and Nina also extend to the consumption of food. The narrator states, “I ate an early supper at the college as part of my wages, and Nina always seemed to have eaten, too, though I didn’t know where. Perhaps her supper was just what she ate all evening—almonds and oranges and a supply of little chocolate kisses wrapped in red or gold or purple foil” (223). Here the ingestion of food replicates the sexuality of these young women; the chaste protagonist eats her three-square cafeteria meals, while the lascivious Nina eats treat-like foodstuffs while lounging in bed wearing only her kimono.

Later in the short story, the narrator learns that Nina is in a relationship with a much older man who spies over her life in an extremely controlling manner, even having her followed throughout the days and nights while she is at the rooming house or on campus. While Mr. Purvis attempts to control all aspects of Nina’s day-to-day life, Nina develops strategies to circumvent his overbearing surveillance. For example, Nina’s tactics for appeasing Mr. Purvis’s food policies are elaborate:

She was supposed to eat lunch and dinner at the cafeteria. Though, as I said, I don’t know whether she ever did. Breakfast was Nescafé in our room, and day-old doughnuts I brought home from the cafeteria. Mr. Purvis did not like the sound of this but he accepted it as part of Nina’s imitation of the college student’s life—as long as she ate a good hot meal once a day and a sandwich and soup at another



meal, and this was what he thought she did. She always checked what the cafeteria was offering, so that she could tell him she'd had the sausages or the Salisbury steak, and the salmon or the egg-salad sandwich. (226)

Nina's unwillingness to follow Mr. Purvis's food rules exemplifies her resistant nature; it also symbolizes Nina's sexual self as outside the purviews of socially sanctioned sexual mores. By telling Mr. Purvis what he wants to hear—that she ate the Salisbury steak for dinner—Nina performs submissive sexuality for Mr. Purvis, while in fact she eats what she chooses. Mr. Purvis's food rules also suggest his extreme and probably abusive control over her.

On the weekends, Nina usually goes to Mr. Purvis's home. On one particular Friday night, however, she falls ill or, more likely, feigns an illness and has the narrator extend her apologies over the phone to Mr. Purvis. She also suggests that the narrator dine with Mr. Purvis, should he invite her: "If he asks you to go and eat with him tomorrow night, why don't you go? There's always something good to eat on Saturday nights—it's special" (229). Unknown to the narrator, the invitation to dine with Mr. Purvis has little to do with food, and is instead a pretext for sexual exploitation. At the behest of Nina, the narrator naively accepts to dine with Mr. Purvis, little knowing that it is her corporality, her naked body, which will be feasted on by his masculine gaze.

On the Saturday evening, the narrator is taken by Mrs. Winner—Mr. Purvis's henchwoman who also spies on Nina—to Mr. Purvis's home. From the basement garage, the narrator travels with Mrs. Winner up an elevator to the first floor: "Mrs. Winner waved me ahead of her through one of the doors that opened off this hallway, into a windowless room with a bench and hooks around the walls. It was just like a school cloakroom, except for the polish on the wood and the carpet on the floor. 'Here is where you leave your clothes,' Mrs. Winner said"

(230). The narrator follows what she thinks is the meaning of Mrs. Winner's request and removes her coat and boots. Mrs. Winner's response marks a fundamental change in the tone of the short story when she states, "Now the rest" (230). The narrator will be required to undress completely before she will be allowed to join Mr. Purvis for their meal together. This demand is a shock to the narrator as Nina had not hinted at such an arrangement: "I did not move to obey, and she [Mrs. Winner] spoke to me casually, as if she could not be bothered with contempt. 'I hope you're not a baby'" (230). This is the first instance where Mrs. Winner, a panderer, challenges the narrator, insinuating that she is not a sexually mature woman because she does not eagerly toss off her clothing in order to be gazed upon by the eccentric Mr. Purvis. The narrator runs through the possible scenarios that might abstract her from this uncomfortable scenario: "I could have reached for my coat, at that point. I could have demanded to be driven back to the rooming house. I could even have walked back on my own. I remembered the way we had come and, though it would have been cold, it would have taken me less than an hour" (231). But before she can come to a decision, Mrs. Winner once again attacks the narrator's adult sexuality: "'Oh, no,' Mrs. Winner said, when I still did not move. 'So you're just a bookworm. That's all you are'" (231). In referring to the narrator as both a baby and bookworm, Mrs. Winner prods the narrator's sexual insecurities. As Luft notes, "it is precisely the narrator's bookwormish tendencies that get her into trouble, and she is hoodwinked, rather than guided, by her intellect" (108). Having focused squarely on her university studies, and with no lovers, no travels with men to distant shores, and no scandalous romances, the narrator's sexual experience is nonexistent compared to that of Nina. Mrs. Winner's choice words goad the protagonist into behaving in opposition to her usual straight-laced self. As an agent for Mr. Purvis's bewildering request, Mrs. Winner acts as the go-between, manipulating the young woman to perform her sexual self in an

exhibitionist fashion. Thus, both Nina and Mrs. Winner are procuring the narrator as a sexual subject.

The narrator realizes the sexual economy of the exchange to come—the male gaze onto her naked female-self—but is provoked into her naked state by a challenge to her adherence to Western mores of female sexual decorum:

It had not occurred to me, either, that the undressing might be a prelude to rape, or to any ceremony but supper. . . . I wasn't stupid enough to think that my being undressed had nothing to do with the sexual uses of my body, but I took it more as a dare than as a preliminary to further trespass, and my going along with it finally had more to do with pride or some shaky recklessness than with anything else.

And that word. "Bookworm." (231-32)

In many ways, the challenge to exhibit her body naked is a trespass of her own sense of bodily boundaries. The narrator appreciates that the nudity is explicitly for Mr. Purvis, but she accepts the challenge to her sexual mores and removes all of her clothes. Ironically, the narrator does not understand the goading as a trick and has instead "compromised herself, and has confirmed what she set out to refute—all without realizing it" (Luft 108). Her actions prove her inability to comprehend the true meaning behind Mrs. Winner's misleading words. While the mothers in both Harvor and Burnard's stories are crushed to find their daughters' growing sexuality, Mrs. Winner is the opposite, goading and preparing young women to act for the sexual pleasure of men, not as wife, but as stripper, prostitute, or mistress.

The coerced nudity of the narrator at the hands of a female agent is vastly different from that of the female protagonists in "Crush" and "One Whole Hour," who are the agents of their own exhibition. Their unbridled determination to expose their bodies, and their accompanying

attempts to find pleasure, are not part of the experience of the young woman in “Wenlock Edge.” As Luft notes, “she misjudges her situation, compromises herself, and, upon discovering the truth, is overwhelmed by shame” (103). Once naked, she is extremely uncomfortable, evident in the self-talk in which she engages: “Here I am, I might have wished to say, in the skin of my body which does not shame me any more than the bareness of my teeth. Of course that was not true, and in fact I had broken out in a sweat, but not for fear of any violation” (232). Curiously, her embarrassment over her body’s misalignment with the ideal body beautiful is at the forefront of her thoughts, and not the possibility of sexual assault. The narrator’s nudity goes against all social rules of civilized decorum, making her exhibition even more upsetting. She is going against conventional societal sexual mores for the visual pleasure of a man, all the while believing that she is engaging in this nudity to prove to herself that she is not just a “bookworm,” not just a sexual “good” girl. Only closer to the narrative’s end does she come to realize her misreading of the evening spent with Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner.

After she removes her clothes, the narrator and Mr. Purvis seat themselves at the dining room table and engage in a ludicrous discussion of classical Greek literature while they eat their meal. The narrator is constantly mindful of her nakedness, while Mr. Purvis behaves as if nothing is out of the ordinary. While Mr. Purvis devours the protagonist with his eyes, she begins to envisage how her body must look to another person, particularly her breasts, as they do not adhere to the “hard, high, and pointy” (Young 77) aesthetic prized in Western culture: “When I was sitting down, the most flagrant part of me was out of sight. If my breasts had been tiny and ornamental, like Nina’s, I could have been almost at ease. Instead, they were large and lollopy; they were like bald night creatures dumbfounded by the light” (233). The narrator experiences a strong sense of body shame, as her own body transgresses the ideal body beautiful aesthetic that

Nina so perfectly projects with her ornamental breasts. The “large and lollopy” breasts are a far cry from the hard and smooth breasts of the protagonist in “Crush,” who is able to hold her breasts knowing “she isn’t wrong about this feeling” (13) and sensing the sexual pull that her body exemplifies. The simile of the “bald night creatures dumbfounded by the light” further expresses the sense of anxiety of Munro’s narrator regarding both her divergence from the body beautiful aesthetic, and her unease with her nudity before the masculine gaze. The animalistic language of the simile extends the notion of the female body as prey, flesh for the male to devour with his eyes.

The shame of her nakedness continues as the narrator is asked to move from the dining room to the library: “My buttocks made a slapping noise, as I loosened myself from the sleek upholstery of the dining-room chair. . . . He apologized for going ahead of me, as he had to do when he carried the coffee. To me it was a relief. I thought that the back of the body—not just mine but anyone’s—was the most beastly part” (234). While the protagonists in “One Whole Hour” and “Crush” feel to a certain extent empowered when they display their femininity before a male, the narrator of “Wenlock Edge” expresses only anxiety regarding her nudity. Much of this anxiousness is because she has been pressured and shamed into removing her clothes for a man she has never met, whereas Harvor and Burnard’s protagonists have sexual feelings for the men to whom they exhibit themselves. Munro’s narrator feels vulnerable and powerless in the nude; performing the role of “bad” girl is frightening rather than empowering.

Once they are seated in the library, Mr. Purvis gives the narrator *A Shropshire Lad* by A. E. Houseman to read aloud, requesting her not to cross her legs as he seats himself facing her (235). As she reads she becomes more at ease: “Shame receded. I just kept turning the pages, reading one poem and then another, then another” (235). While the narrator becomes more

comfortable in her own nakedness, Mr. Purvis abruptly ends the reading and shows her back to the room where she had left her clothes. Not once throughout the evening does Mr. Purvis physically touch her, leaving her feeling perplexed as she leaves his home. In the days after, the young woman's feelings of shame return: "I would always be reminded of what I had done. What I had agreed to do. Not been forced, not ordered, not even persuaded. Agreed to do" (243). The narrator's remembrances of the evening are not quite correct, as she was most certainly goaded into her nakedness by Mrs. Winner. This narrative demonstrates how easily young women can be pressured into believing that their femininity, their womanliness, is predicated on their naked selves, hypersexualized for a masculine gaze. When the exposed body parts transgress the ideal body, as they do with the narrator, the female feels shame as the sexual economy of the encounter is completely one-sided.

Towards the end of the narrative, the protagonist is feeling resentful and angry with Nina, and humiliated by her false impressions and misreading of Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner. She realizes that her interpretation of her nudity with Mr. Purvis was incorrect. Her nudity was not a game to be won with Mr. Purvis and she had not come off as his "equal" (243). Instead, she recognizes the power imbalance of the encounter: clothing gave him power and lack of clothing took hers away. As the protagonist felt shame at the dinner table and suffered waves of flushing, Mr. Purvis's voice would change, "becoming more soothing and politely satisfied, as if he'd just made a winning move in a game" (233). Feeling "[a] far greater shame it seemed now than at the time," the protagonist makes the next move, striking back at Nina in the hopes of regaining some power. She mails Mr. Purvis a letter with the address of Ernie Botts: the cousin of the protagonist's mother and the man with whom Nina has recently been having a clandestine relationship. This is but another instance where a woman is pandering for Mr. Purvis. Getting in

touch with her own “wickedness,” the protagonist wants Mr. Purvis to discover Nina’s lover, and to humiliate and punish Nina for procuring the protagonist in the first place. This girl-on-girl crime showcases men as holding the power in the heterosexual economy, while the women fight for the scraps. The power structure of the “game” (243) is evidently unbalanced.

Munro’s use of names in “Wenlock Edge” is a thoughtful extension of the character’s depiction and also complicates the reader’s understanding of the *dénouement*. Luft aptly describes the character’s names: “Ernie is earnest, Mr. Purvis is a pervert, and Mrs. Winner a winner” (106). However, Luft notes that the name Nina, meaning ‘little girl’ in Spanish, could be misleading. Is Nina “vulnerable and innocent” (106)? Or is she instead manipulative and calculating, using the protagonist and her cousin Ernie to her advantage against Mr. Purvis? While Nina’s motives remain unclear, the unnamed protagonist acts vindictively toward Nina. The narrator’s spitefulness could arguably be misdirected, since she has some responsibility to shoulder, too. According to Luft, “As the agent of her own destruction, she is like a bookworm. It is with her help that Mr. Purvis devours her, as she has exposed herself to him. She is both book and worm, hen and dinner guest, the eaten and the eater, complicit in the devastation wrought upon her by Mr. Purvis” (111-12). Unable to bear the shame she feels because of her duplicity in her nudity and the validity of Mrs. Winner’s hurtful “bookworm” classification, the narrator reveals Nina’s whereabouts to Mr. Purvis.

The titles of these three short stories add another dimension of complexity to the themes of sexual economy and power. In Harvor’s “One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine” the title suggests the importance of both the teenage girl (who spends part of the hour with Proust) and her mother (who spends it with novocaine). The mother is literally being numbed by the novocaine at the dentist’s office, while the daughter is figuratively numbed by her

body's pleasurable response to Eric's rubbing of it. At the narrative's end, the mother is "flushed and upset" (158) to discover that her daughter has spent the afternoon reading Proust. The final sentence of the story is spoken by the mother as she questions whether a girl of her daughter's age should be reading such a book (158). Prior to this, the mother had been anesthetized to her daughter's sexual awakening, but her physical flushing and distress at the dinner table suggests her awakening to her daughter's budding sexuality. The mother's distress in "One Whole Hour" is similar to that of the mother in Burnard's "Crush." The word "Crush" has multiple meanings: both the feelings the girl has for Adam, and the kind of punishment in store for the story's female characters. As in Harvor's story, the mother in Burnard's is emotionally crushed to see her daughter's sexual awakening. The mother feels "barren" and as if she "is not a mother any more" (12). The mother also tries to crush and shame her daughter into sexual conformity (11). However, the daughter avoids the crushing of her sexuality, and instead trusts "this feeling" (13). The sexual attraction and power she experiences is the "best feeling she's ever had. . . . It is something she will trust, from now on" (13). In exhibiting her body to the man she has a crush on, she performs sexual power.

Munro's title "Wenlock Edge" refers to a poem in A. E. Houseman's collection of sixty-three poems titled *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). It is the collection of poetry that Mr. Purvis asks the protagonist to read while he watches her naked body. The protagonist begins her reading with poem thirty-one: "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble." She finds peace in the rhythm and familiar words, and "shame recede[s]" (235), perhaps because of the collection's theme of mortality and the importance of seizing the day. However, she does not realize that Mr. Purvis's home is a "version of Wenlock Edge and that the wood is her" (Luft 108). Luft believes that the narrator "goes from feeling on edge to feeling complacent. In so doing, she falls off the edge, so



to speak, into new territories of humiliation and self-awareness” (12). Only at the story’s conclusion does the protagonist appreciate her own sexual maturity at the precipice of knowledge. Like the wood “in trouble,” under the gaze of Mr. Purvis and the pressure of Mrs. Winner the protagonist keeps on “learning things” (246) in order to better comprehend the sexual economy between men and women.

This chapter examines both intentional and coerced female nudity in Canadian short fiction and the oftentimes problematic motivations for such actions. The female protagonists of these stories exhibit their bodies for a spectrum of reasons, but all three end up objectifying themselves, making their bodies objects to be gazed at like the picture of the Shrimp Girl from Harvor’s “One Whole Hour.” Their nakedness trumpets their sexual maturity, their move from “good” girl to “bad,” to please different audiences at different times. What is particularly troubling about these stories’ representations of the transition from girlhood to sexual maturity is the ubiquitousness of the masculine gaze and the anonymity of the protagonists, as they are all nameless. The presence of male watchers in these stories suggests that the sexual self-understanding of young women is predicated upon a masculine gaze, and that the body being gazed at must fulfill the requirements of body beautiful in order for the experience to conform to societal norms about sexuality. The absence of names for the protagonists suggests that their experiences with social power are shared by more than one woman of this era, or even ours. In exhibiting their bodies for men, the protagonists discover that their main source of power is their physical appearance; their bodies are tools that they can and do manipulate for the purpose of performing power. Self-confidence grows for the woman character if she is the one who incites the nudity, receiving approval from the male by way of sexual attention. However, discomfort, unease, and shame result when the female character, like the narrator in “Wenlock Edge,” is

coerced into exhibiting her body for a man in whom she has no sexual interest. Despite the fact that these short stories are set in the mid-twentieth century, their narratives of heterosexual maturity as performed for the male gaze are still strikingly relevant today, when young women's power and agency is routinely enveloped in their hypersexualization. These three short stories critique the socio-cultural practices and beliefs surrounding women's bodies in a particular time and place, and yet such criticisms would not be out of place in the twenty-first century. The intergenerational transmission of societal norms and expectations—from an older male teenager to a thirteen year-old girl; from a mother to a daughter; from the pimp-esque Mrs. Winner to the bookworm protagonist—are deeply entrenched within the performance of an ideal femininity.

## Chapter 5

### “My Body is My Canvas”: Transforming and Performing the Female Body in Marian Engel’s “The Tattooed Woman” and Barbara Gowdy’s “Ninety-three Million Miles Away”

In the previous chapter, the performance of female teenage heterosexuality in Canadian short stories was shown to be shaped by familial input, literary influences, interactions with peers, and sexual instinct, culminating in nudity and/or self-stimulation and the young women’s recognition of the inherent power of their bodies. In this chapter, both nudity and self-stimulation figure prominently, not as a concluding denouement to the storyline but instead as vehicles for the protagonists to tell their stories. The short stories by Marian Engel and Barbara Gowdy focus on adult female characters—Engel’s nameless protagonist and Gowdy’s protagonist Ali—who are at crossroads in their marriages. The texts explore the ways in which these characters use their bodies as canvases to speak their frustrations and heartache. The protagonists are initially voiceless, a state common to many of the female characters whose stories are explored in this dissertation.<sup>27</sup> Unable to speak their unhappiness in their marriages, both turn inward and discover the cathartic nature of body art and performance. With razor and skin, Engel’s protagonist becomes the Tattooed Woman, “carved like an old shaman” (8). Through a process of catharsis, her scarification of her body alters not only the surface of her skin, but also her perception of her marriage. While the Tattooed Woman carves her body canvas, Gowdy’s Ali also transforms her body into a canvas, performing peepshows for the voyeur living across the street as she paints a nude self-portrait. Exhibitionism is Ali’s vehicle for expressing not just her

---

<sup>27</sup> The inability to speak one’s pain and suffering is explored in Eden Robinson’s “Queen of the North” (Chapter 1), Linda Svendsen’s “White Shoulders” (Chapter 2), and Madeleine Thien’s “Alchemy” (Chapter 3). However, in these instances, the female characters are all teenaged girls who cannot speak about the sexual abuse they have been enduring at the hands of male family members.

sexual self, but also her discontent with a lifestyle that brings her little stimulation or satisfaction. In both Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" and Gowdy's "Ninety-three Million Miles Away," the female protagonists are enthralled by the therapeutic and energizing artistry of their bodies, but are ultimately frustrated by the subjective and even fruitless responses of the men who witness their bodies as they are transformed. Performing body modifications either in shadows or in magnifying light, these women attempt to reclaim their sense of self through their bodies. Using the theoretical perspective of Andrea Mayrhofer on the meaning of self-injurious behaviours, as well as Victoria Pitts's claims of extreme body modifications and scarification as embodied resistance, I argue that the character I will call the Tattooed Woman is more or less successful at discovering a greater sense of self and agency in her future existence possibly outside her marriage. However, using Orbach's theories of "body shame" (*Bodies* 8) and María Jesús Hernáez Lerena's claims of deviation as paradox, I interpret Ali's attempt at self-reclamation as ambiguous because she ultimately cannot control how others interpret her body canvas.

Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" was first broadcast on Robert Weaver's CBC radio program *Anthology* in 1975, and appeared in print in the 1985 collection also called *The Tattooed Woman* the same year as Engel's death at the age of 51. "The Tattooed Woman" tells the story of a married woman at the moment her husband acknowledges his infidelity, detailing the ways in which she copes with his continued transgressions. In his review of Engel's posthumous collection, Eugene McNamara argues that "The Tattooed Woman" is "written to formula with a fashionably feminist thesis to advance. The woman's pain, then, seems stagey, deliberately off-beat" (886). My appraisal of the story, unlike McNamara's patronizing reading, is that the intentionally feminist approach and elements of fantasy in the story are appealing in their ability to raise important questions and concerns about gender relations. In "Explod/ing/ed Fictions:

Marian Engel's Writing," Christl Verduyn explains that "[t]he incursion into the realm of the imagination, the fantastic, the irrational, [is] increasingly frequent in Engel's work" (19).

Verduyn believes that Engel's stories "move toward shaping, through fiction, a more female-oriented reality" (13) and that their protagonists "lean further and further away from the puritan and patriarchal reality they and other women are expected to accept, toward a freer world of the female imagination where the fantastic and the extra-ordinary explode reality into and through fiction" (13). Thus, Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" challenges the literary conventions of the short story genre through its combining of the unbelievable and the possible of the female experience "beyond culturally determined representations of the feminine" (Howells 72).

While infidelity within a marriage is a subject that plays out in all genres of Canadian literature, what marks this story as unique is the path the protagonist takes towards healing: initial self-injury through what is known in the twenty-first century as "cutting" and described by the Canadian Mental Health Association as "cutting the skin with razor blades." The term "self-injury" is used throughout this chapter to describing the Tattooed Woman's cutting, although the terms "self-harm" and "self-abuse" are also used in the literature in reference to "deliberate acts that cause harm to one's body, mind and spirit" ("Self-Injury"). However, as Paul Sweetman acknowledges, the experience is just as important as the "lived-reality" (181). Cutting is an abject ritual that "relieves or dulls emotional pain, distress, frustration, or other negative feelings" (Gay and Whittington 71). As Andrea Mayrhofer argues, the functions of cutting include to calm, to castigate, to control, and to communicate (30-32). Non-suicidal in intent (Mayrhofer 33), self-injury through cutting of the skin is an act of control and messaging. This communicating through the body is similar to the actions of the bulimic and anorectic characters discussed in Chapter 3, whose bodies speak their distress. Mayrhofer, too, sees linkages between

eating distress and self-injury: “The common element in eating disorders and self-cutting is the purposeful use of one’s body to express changing identities, concomitant emotions, a need to gain or regain control and, at a deeper level, to feel clean, purged and pure, that is, worthy” (39-40). As Mayrhofer makes clear, the female body speaks, expresses, and communicates desires to live within the social constructions of the female body while paradoxically extending beyond and combating those same forces via harmful body practices.

Engel’s protagonist uses her body as a canvas; it becomes a site where she can work, scrape, and carve through her husband’s adultery. But before the protagonist begins to use a razor blade on her face, arms, and breasts, she reflects on her husband’s admission and tries to make sense of what might have driven him to have an affair. One area she finds fault with is her body, which is scarred and disfigured because of two surgical procedures. As the narrator notes, comparing herself to the woman with whom her husband is having an affair, “The girl was twenty-one, a year older than their son. She was forty-two, exactly twice the girl’s age. She had nothing to offer. She had kept her figure, but her body, transformed by hysterectomy and appendectomy, was not new or neat or pretty. Surgeons were better now, she understood” (4). The woman wonders if her body, which reveals evidence of childbirth and the removal of body parts, is to blame for her husband’s affair with Linda, a young clerk and stock girl working at his drug store. She believes she has “nothing to offer,” which can be understood as having nothing to provide sexually to her husband. The woman blames her body scars—visible reminder of her barrenness after having her reproductive organs removed—for her husband’s sexual dalliance.

Married for twenty-one years, a point repeated by the third-person limited narrator at the beginning of four sequential paragraphs (4), the woman and her husband lead very separate lives; he works at his drug store while “[s]he filled her days with trivia, belonged to a golf club,

gossiped with friends, read magazines. Read books, though, too; trying to keep up with the latest public passions” (4). Similar to the marital arrangement in Gowdy’s “Ninety-three Million Miles Away,” in which Claude, Ali’s husband, works outside the home as a plastic surgeon while Ali remains at home, the Tattooed Woman’s life is described as insignificant and not particularly fulfilling. Her discontent with this lifestyle is taken to another level once her husband admits to having and continuing to have an affair. Only then does the protagonist begin to demonstrate her unhappiness via her body canvas.

Attempting to boost her spirits, the woman uses humour, at first, to assuage her distress at her husband’s painful revelation. Ruminating over his relationship with Linda, she notes that the twenty-one year old will notice that her husband has no hair on his left leg due to a bad case of athlete’s foot and that his ears are lopsided (5). She continues in this vein, ending with the following outlandish thought: “Well, she said to herself, he isn’t really anybody’s catch. He snores. In two years he’ll be fifty. I must get out and find a lover” (5). This tongue-in-cheek statement, meant to temper the distress of the difficult marital situation she finds herself in, is of little comfort as she admits later that she “had no idea how [to find a lover], never having been with anyone but him” (5). Dismissing the notion of actively seeking a romantic and sexual liaison, the woman instead passively ruminates in the evenings over what she sees as her corporeal shortcomings:

It was the nights that were bad. She would dress for bed and sit in her lingerie thinking of the girl’s body, the legs that had never had veins pulled out, the privates from which children and miscarriages and later tumours had never been extracted. The humiliations she had never been exposed to. Poor, poor little thing.

She thought of her as tight and white and neat and almost hairless, like the oriental women in American G.I. stories. (5)

This evening ritual is more than just the woman pitying the situation in which she finds herself. She enumerates the ways in which her femaleness—legs and uterus—have failed her. She first mentions the varicose veins considered unsightly but certainly not life threatening, then focuses on the reproductive difficulties she has experienced (both live births and miscarriages), and concludes the statement with the revelation of the extraction of tumours from her uterus. The reader never learns in the short story whether these tumours were benign or malignant. However, her body's transgressions, similar to those of Atwood's protagonist Kat from "Hairball," are experienced as "humiliations" (Engel 5) that leave her outside the realm of the ideal "body beautiful" (Orbach, *Bodies* 3), which she typifies through her imagination and exoticization of Linda's body. By othering and exoticizing Linda's body, the woman is able to rationalize why her husband desires such a body. The Tattooed Woman's actions, though dissimilar to those undertaken by the protagonists discussed in Chapter 3, also create a misfit body that transgresses the ideal body. Not only is the act of cutting therapeutic, but also the resulting body modification speaks a desire to align her corporeal self with the exotic, "experience[d]" women of the world—women like those from the National Geographic.

Fixated on her corporeal self as a living example of her failure to embody an ideal femininity, as well as her bodily contrast to Linda's presumed svelte, young, and whole body, the woman proactively begins to shape her corporeal self with her own hands, cutting and marking her skin with a razor blade:

I am forty-two and she is twenty-one, she thought. Neatly and very lightly, she carved a little star on her forehead. Experience must show, she thought. Her



cheeks were a little bumpy with age now, and she thought of African women in the National Geographic magazine with beautiful slashes in their ebony skins. She made a few little marks and decided she lacked technique. Then she went to bed and slept very, very well. (6)

Her first foray into cutting her skin becomes an exercise in demarcating her exterior as an “experience[d]” one, repeating the information about their age difference, and embracing her bodily experience by carving it on her skin. The woman’s appropriation of another culture’s mode of marking and scarring the skin indicates a desperate need for kinship, as she attempts to align her exterior with the images of African women with “beautiful slashes in their ebony skins” (6). Because this scarification is outside the indigenous cultural context, the meaning behind the act and the image is divergent from its original cultural meaning. Scarification, the branding of the skin via cutting or burning, has been practiced for thousands of years amongst indigenous peoples across the globe, including in New Zealand, Australia, and Central America, as well as by members of many ethnic groups within Africa, including the Yoruba peoples in present-day Nigeria, the Luba of central Africa, and the Dinka from the Sudan (Gay and Whittington 62-71). Scars can be evidence of bodily trauma from injury or surgery, yet, as Kathlyn Gay and Christine Whittington make clear, scarification in the Western context has frequently been associated with “counterculture or alternative lifestyles” and is growing in popularity in the United States and Canada (63). Scarification can represent “religious or rite-of-passage rituals” (64) as well as membership in a particular community (65). While the implications of her cultural appropriation are unrecognized by the Tattooed Woman, she finds the act of carving her face cathartic, evident in the revelation that she “slept very, very well” (6) that evening.

As Victoria Pitts posits in “Reclaiming the Female Body: Women Body Modifiers and Feminist Debates,” body modifications such as scarification “provide ritualized opportunities for women’s self-transformation and for symbolically recovering the female body” (270). However, Pitts counsels readers to think critically about body modification and “resist overly celebratory interpretations that imply that, in postmodern culture, we are all now fully in control of inscribing our bodies, or that we view the body as fully unfixed and individually malleable. Women’s marked bodies exemplify both the praxis of culturally marginal body projects and the limits of that praxis” (Pitts 279-80). Pitts’s position on body modification, that it can be a positive experience for the woman but that the act and resulting scars are produced within a particular culture and society, suggest that self-cutting and scarification are, as Mayrhofer states, “socio-cultural expressions of emotions via the body” (39). For the woman, the act of cutting the skin becomes a ritualized reclamation of the self through the body, but the interpretation of that body is limited by societal influences on and perspectives of her audience.

While the scarification ritual traditionally demonstrates initiation or membership in a community (Gay and Whittington 65), the cutting by the protagonist in Engel’s story and the resulting scars lead to isolation; she must avoid her spouse and her friends at the golf club as they “were sure to notice something” (6). Rose Weitz notes that in Western cultures, extreme body modification—as undertaken by the Tattooed Woman—can be regarded as “abject” (269). In “From Filth to Defilement,” Julia Kristeva describes the abject in terms of the potential of the female body to be unclean or disgusting (64-65). Cutting and the resulting scars create an abject or potentially disgusting body, yet the woman develops a greater and greater affinity for both. Moreover, Pitts notes that “[w]omen who undertake such body modifications [tattoos, scars, and piercings] are not ignorant of the abjection that they can provoke” (270). For the Tattooed

Woman however, the ritualized cutting and eventual scarification of her body is a paradoxical act. On the one hand the woman wants to distance her body from an ideal. However, in twentieth-century Western culture, her body modifications place her in a space of abjection. She participates in an action that inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts to the point that she feels the need to hide her resulting body canvas. As a vehicle to relieve the emotional pain she experiences because of her husband's continued infidelity, she carves her body on a nightly basis: "She did not cut deeply. She was not interested in hurting herself. On her breasts she made lovely arabesques, on her forearms almost unnoticeable cross-hatchings of little houses and trees. They did not show very much, but she knew they were there and was comforted" (6). For the now Tattooed Woman, her cuttings and scarring symbolize a reclamation. Her body canvas is an artistic reclamation because she has control of the process and control of what is happening to her body. However, she does not make a socio-cultural reading of her newly scarred body.

In the article "Only Skin Deep? Tattooing, Piercing and the Transgressive Body," Paul Sweetman reveals the complexities of body modifications, particularly the emotional experiences during the transformative act:

[T]he painful, invasive and bloody nature of the procedures involved, and their subjective and corporeal effects, are central rather than peripheral to the experiences and motivations of many contemporary body modifiers, and [thus] to focus solely on the effects that tattooing and piercing have on the appearance of the 'outer body' would be to miss much of what constitutes the lived-reality of such practices. (181)

As Sweetman makes clear, for people who engage in body modification the body experience is just as important as is the altered body appearance. For the Tattooed Woman, self-inflicted pain is a method to cope with the negative emotions she experiences because of her husband's infidelity.

In her effort to demarcate her body as one that is "experience[d]" (6), however, the Tattooed Woman isolates herself from her support system, including her friends, and further distances herself from her husband and her community in general. She sits in the dark at home in her husband's presence and only ventures out of the house to sit behind the cover of a fern at the local shopping plaza where her husband's drug store is located (7). While the "lived-reality" (Sweetman 181) of self-cutting is comforting to the Tattooed Woman, the effects on her "outer body" cause her to hide in the shadows and to become an observer of life instead of a participant. At the shopping plaza, she observes her husband's interactions with Linda, even venturing into the store one day to purchase cigarettes from an unknowing Linda working at the checkout. She immediately compares her body to that of Linda: "She [Linda] had a clear complexion and a neat little body under her nylon shift" (7). Linda's body exhibits the qualities that the Tattooed Woman's no longer does: clear skin and an orderly, slim, and "complete" body. The Tattooed Woman uses scarification as a way of ensuring that her body is even more divergent from Linda's, making her body transgressive and deliberately deviating from the ideal body. Sweetman details how unconventional body modification, which I believe could also include scarification, distance the body from the societal ideal: "[I]n contrast to the more mainstream activities such as dieting and 'keep-fit', tattooing and piercing arguably move the body further away from, rather than closer towards, the hegemonic Western ideal of the youthful, slim and *unmarked* body which lies at the heart of Western (consumer) culture" (166). Scarification can

be understood as a repudiation of the “body beautiful” ideal (Orbach, *Bodies* 3). The Tattooed Woman’s active strategy to carve her body functions as tactical transgression, a thumbing of her nose at socio-cultural perspectives of female beauty. The “right body” (Orbach, *Bodies* 3) exemplified by Linda is too narrow and homogeneous, too congruent with societal expectations of feminine beauty. In tattooing, or rather cutting, the woman not only accomplishes a distancing from Linda, but also affirms her body and selfhood as independent from her spouse and from socio-cultural pressures surrounding beauty.

As the woman continues her routine of carving her body by night and observing her husband and Linda by day, she begins to rationalize her self-injurious cutting as artistic expression and as historical artifact: “I am an artist, now, she thought, a true artist. My body is my canvas. I am very old, and very beautiful, I am carved like an old shaman, I am an artifact of an old culture, my body is a pictograph from prehistory, it has been used and bent and violated and broken, but I have resisted. I am Somebody” (8). The repetition of the phrase “I am” five times functions as repeated affirmation of the Tattooed Woman’s existence and value because of her body’s exterior markings. She is transforming herself into an artist of the body, a walking canvas, a pictograph depicting her lived existence. Through scarification, Verduyn states, “she might recuperate some value for herself, find a new place for herself as an artist, someone whose role is not just to *reproduce* . . . but rather, someone who produces” (18). Part of the motivation for turning the body into a canvas is thus the sense of agency it provides as she produces art from herself. In the Preface to the 1985 Penguin edition of *The Tattooed Woman*, Timothy Findley writes, “[I]n Marian Engel’s hands, this woman with the scars becomes a marvel of self control. Her scars become works of art: *she* becomes a work of art” (ix). No longer a passive observer of her body as it ages, declines, and is taken away piece by piece, the Tattooed Woman exerts

control of the exterior body. As Sweetman concludes about body art like tattooing, it is a means of expression to “assert control *of* the body rather than *over* it” (182). To write on the body is to demonstrate the agency of the body, and in so doing, to demonstrate the body as that which is above and beyond socio-cultural ideals. Aligning her body with that of an “old shaman,” an artifact of an “old culture,” and a “pictograph from prehistory,” the Tattooed Woman wants her body to speak a message from one generation to the next, from the experienced woman to the younger woman having an affair with her husband. From a liminal position, “poised between two positions—the person they were and the person they want to become” (Pitts 269), the Tattooed Woman wants her lived experiences acknowledged through her scarification. The scars become evidence of her lived reality and a recovering of her body for herself.

Eventually, the husband discovers his wife observing his interactions with Linda in the drug store. He violently grabs the protagonist and verbally assaults her, but stops short when he at last sees her body modifications. He does not interpret the scarification as an appeal for kinship and community, nor as repudiation of socio-cultural ideals of the female body. Instead, appalled by her abject body, he takes her to a doctor. Initially, the doctor understands the self-injurious behaviour as an appeal to the husband, a cry for attention, and a demonstration of her suffering. Because she has lost her husband to a younger woman, her doctor codes the cutting and carving of her skin as a message to the husband, stating, “You must have loved him very much” (8). After observing the severity and extent of the self-cutting, the doctor discusses her therapeutic options, suggesting the distraction of travel as an alternative to self-injury. They engage conversationally, he explaining to her that she must move beyond her emotional trauma and the physical trauma she has caused her body:

“I want you to decide where you want to go and what you want to be.”

“I am myself,” she said.

“Clearly, that has not been enough to sustain you.”

“No.”

“When the scars are healed,” he said, “you will cease your mourning.” (8)

The doctor finally questions the woman, asking her what she thinks of as she cuts her skin. Her response refers back to kinship building, positioning her tattooing as an act of sacrifice to Linda: “I think, she [Linda] is clean, she is clear, I broke my body for him, now I break it for her. She is my daughter, she is my other self. In this way, I make her old and wise” (9). The Tattooed Woman rationalizes the self-cutting as a symbolic gesture that passes on her knowledge to a member of the younger generation who has taken her place in the social world. In her review of Engel’s story collection, Elizabeth Brady posits the agency behind the self-injurious behaviour: “As it [self-cutting] compels complicit others to witness what she has suffered, and as it allows her to move beyond the scars of her victimization into a new condition of empowerment, her act is redemptive” (Brady 95). Certainly the scarification is a physical expression of her suffering which others will witness. While the message itself is never stated in words, the doctor interprets the act and resulting condition of her body as a demonstration of her disappointment in her husband but also her disappointment that she allowed her life to be lived in the shadows of her husband’s wants and needs.

Not until the *dénouement* does the Tattooed Woman experience an epiphany about the reasons she has carved her body, and an understanding of the messages she is sending through her bodily modifications: “[S]uddenly, she knew what she had done and why she had done it. She had done it to get his pity, and pity was not a thing he had to give. He and his girl would not come and rub the healing ointments on her body. They would vacate themselves, they would run

away to their private pleasures” (9). In her discussion with the doctor, the Tattooed Woman at last understands her self-cutting as a cry for sympathy and a call for compassion on the part of her husband and Linda. Elizabeth Brady recognizes the gendered reading of the tattooing: “The dominant (male) culture perceives it as abnormal; the woman regards it merely as flesh-inscription of the psychic scarring inflicted upon her by ‘normal’ male behaviour” (Brady 55). Although the Tattooed Woman has tried to speak her wisdom as well as her distress via her scars, she realizes the limits of her embodied resistance: neither her husband nor his mistress will interpret the wisdom of the message, since they are too engrossed in their own lives and love affair.

Having spent most of her life living for her husband and his business, the Tattooed Woman is ready to assert control, not just of her body but also of her future life, asking the doctor to “send me to some kind of clinic where I can get rid of the worst of the scars” (9). The doctor does not seem to agree with her plan. He suggests instead that she go somewhere hot and that her scars will “make a very striking tan” (9). The doctor appreciates her message of embodied resistance and seems to want the woman to celebrate her scarification through the amplification of a tan. Her affirmations of self worth and realization that her cutting, while therapeutic, will not bring back her husband’s love or end his dalliance with Linda, cause the Tattooed Woman to imagine a new life. Since the artist’s message goes misunderstood and unappreciated by the intended audience—Linda and the woman’s husband—the woman wishes to recreate a blank canvas. While the artistic act of scarification comforts and calms, it is only “redemptive insofar as it compels complicit others to witness what she has suffered” (Brady 55). I would argue that ultimately the artistry of her embodied resistance goes unheeded and unheard, except by the peripheral figure of the doctor. Nevertheless, the Tattooed Woman declares herself



“Somebody” (8), which indicates a new-found belief in her existence as a person outside of her marriage. Similar to Descartes proposition *je pense, donc je suis*, philosophically the woman seems to be stating, *I carve, therefore I am*.

While the Tattooed Woman eventually gains a greater appreciation of life beyond her role as wife, the protagonist of Barbara Gowdy’s “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” has great difficulty imagining fulfillment beyond the realm of her marriage. First published in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*’s twentieth-anniversary issue in 1991, “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” was subsequently published in a collection of women’s erotica<sup>28</sup> and in Gowdy’s 1996 collection *We So Seldom Look on Love: Stories*. In the story, protagonist Ali uses her corporeal self as vehicle to speak to and invite a specific masculine gaze. Whereas the Tattooed Woman moves her body further away from the Western ideal of “body beautiful” (Orbach, *Bodies* 3), Ali works to transform her body into an object of male desire, a performative entity that finds fulfillment only in pleasuring the male gaze. Told from a third-person limited point of view, Gowdy’s short story begins with an eye-opening revelation regarding the motivation for the protagonist’s marriage: “At least part of the reason why Ali married Claude, a cosmetic surgeon with a growing practice, was so that she could quit her boring government job. . . . He gave her a generous allowance and told her to do what she wanted” (95). From this first sentence, the reader learns that the protagonist has entered into marriage with Claude in part so that she no longer has to engage in paid labour; her husband supports them both. Just as Engel’s Tattooed Woman engages in no paid labour and struggles with self-esteem, Ali is not sure what she wants, “aside from trying on clothes in expensive stores” (95). In an effort to find fulfillment in her day-to-day activities, Ali takes up reading as a vocation, “five days a week, five to six hours a day” (95). For an entire year she tries this strategy, but ultimately decides that “if she had any *creative* talent, which was the

---

<sup>28</sup> *Slow Hand—Women Writing Erotica*, edited by Michele Slung and published by Harper Collins, New York, 1992.

only kind she really admired, she wasn't going to find it by armouring herself with facts" (96). She worries that her husband wants her to have a baby, so that she can fill her days with child-rearing. Uninterested in having children, Ali searches for new ways to pass her days and find fulfillment and satisfaction.

The catalysts for ending her reading are a move to a new home, "a condominium apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows" (96), and an influential dream. Ali embraces the act of painting and nude self-portraiture because she interprets her dream as a signal to create art inspired by her own image; the dream is "about spotting her signature in the corner of a painting, and realizing from the conversation of the men who were admiring it (and blocking her view) that it was an extraordinary rendition of her naked self. She took the dream to be a sign" (96). This dream functions as a preliminary statement of the importance that the protagonist places on the approval and appreciation of the masculine gaze on her corporeality. Significantly, the male figures obstruct Ali's ability to see the beauty of her image, a recurring theme throughout Gowdy's short story. Understanding the dream as a call to paint, Ali purchases the necessary supplies and sets up a work area near windows and beside a full-length mirror. She removes her robe and pajamas, only to discover that it "aroused her a little to witness her careless shedding of clothes" (97). Observing herself in the mirror sexually stimulates Ali, but only to a certain extent. Self-criticism and doubt regarding the beauty of her body creep into her thoughts. Not willing to trust her own vision and perception of her beauty, she questions what others see and understand when they gaze on her body: "Did other people find her looks ambiguous? Claude was always calling her beautiful, except that the way he put it—'You're beautiful to me,' or 'I think you're beautiful'—made it sound as if she should understand that his taste in women was unconventional" (98). Ali remains skeptical of her body exemplifying a beautiful body aesthetic,

demonstrating what Orbach refers to as “bodily instability and body shame” (*Bodies* 8). Because her husband is a plastic surgeon by trade, Ali appreciates his “expert” opinion of her beauty, not trusting her own vision and conception. Claude’s profession and livelihood depend on women wanting to alter their bodies in some fashion in order to enhance, transform, and achieve a semblance of body beautiful. It is his job to find “imperfections” in the aesthetic appearance of his clients. It is no wonder that Ali experiences sensitivity about her appearance because her husband’s profession sees bodies as “objects to be honed and worked on” (Orbach, *Bodies* 2).

Determined to find beauty and inspiration in her mirrored self-reflection, Ali decides to try out various alluring poses. The act of posing and then touching herself in sexually suggestive ways awakens Ali’s sexual self, but she is abruptly jolted out of her reverie when she notices an obtrusive masculine gaze:

She smiled and tossed her head, she tucked her hair behind her ears. She covered her breasts with her hands. Down her cleavage a drop of sweat slid haltingly, a sensation like the tip of a tongue. She circled her palms until her nipples hardened. She imagined a man’s hands . . . not Claude’s—a man’s hands not attached to any particular man. She looked out the window. In the apartment across from her she saw a man. (98)

Horried at first, Ali leaps for cover behind the protection of the drapes. She is not shamed, but instead astonished at the sexual charge she experiences at having been seen by the male gazer: “And then it was her feet that were moving involuntarily, taking her from behind the drapes into a preternatural brightness. . . . She didn’t look at the window or at the mirror. She had the tranced sensation of being at the edge of a cliff” (99). Like the protagonist in Munro’s “Wenlock Edge” who sits naked willingly as a man gazes on her nude body, Ali makes her feet move herself from

the protective shadows of the curtains to the almost abnormal sunshine streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. She begins to paint an image of her naked self as the unidentified male neighbour continues his voyeuristic activities.

Ali's behaviour painting in the nude under the watchful eyes of her neighbour is peculiar to say the least. In an interview for *Blood and Aphorisms*, Gowdy explores the reasons she creates characters who behave in ways the reader may judge to be atypical: "I see my characters as hyper-normal. They behave as they do because I try to render them as truthfully as I can while doing my best not to play literary tricks with them. I reject formulaic literary characterizations" (38). Working outside the limited space of standard characterizations allows Gowdy to explore the abject, that which degrades the subject and which readers may find threatening and transgressive. In both Engel and Gowdy's short stories, the protagonists make astonishing bodily choices and actions. The depicted female characters are resourceful, using their bodies to communicate not just with others but with themselves, suggesting that Engel and Gowdy are writers engaged in storytelling that characterizes women as active agents, performing power in their lives. The characters' corporeal performances may be "hyper-normal," yet Ali and the Tattooed Woman are speaking their discontent using an out-of-the-ordinary vehicle through which to do so: their bodies.

Ali continues to paint her nude self-portrait—splashing paint all over her torso and arms in the process—until the direct sunlight is no longer shining on her body and canvas. At that point, she uses a rag and turpentine to wipe off the paint from her body, yet another performance to titillate her neighbour. While doing so, "[s]he thought about the sun. That it is ninety-three million miles away and that its fuel supply will last another five billion years. Instead of thinking about the man who was watching her, she tried to recall a solar chart she had memorized a

couple of years ago” (99). The title of Gowdy’s short story “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” implies a huge distance. That distance can signify perspective in relation to Ali’s body as she is very distant from her own arousal. This distance also calls attention to the gap between the social world as it is and as it should be. In characterizing men in positions of power (plastic surgeon and physician, as the neighbouring watcher is eventually discovered to be), who judge, appreciate, and esteem female beauty, Gowdy subtly suggests the many miles we have to go as a society to rectify our valuation and treatment of the female body.

Moreover, the sun and its preternatural rays are understood as a life force that reifies the masculine gaze. When she stands in the spotlight of the sunshine, Ali is not only performing for the male voyeur, she is also metaphorically fueled by that gaze. The rays of sun act to highlight and draw attention to her body, while also aiding Ali to germinate and develop her sexual self:

“There was no reason to clean her arms, but she lifted each one and wiped the cloth over it. She wiped her breasts. She seemed to share in his scrutiny, as if she were looking at herself through his eyes. From his perspective she was able to see her physical self very clearly” (99-100).

Imagining her body through her neighbour’s gaze, Ali bears witness to her corporeality, a remarkable change from earlier in morning—before her exhibitionism—when she could not appreciate her body or beauty as she remained both physically and metaphorically “in the dark” (98). She breaks from her peepshow-esque performance and acknowledges the gaze of the neighbour by walking up to her window, placing her palms on the glass, and looking directly at him, while the neighbour reacts by quickly stepping “back into shadow” (100). The interplay between light and dark, preternatural rays and mysterious shadows, is executed by Gowdy in such a way that the female body is cast in joyous sunshine, while the male body is personified in

shadow. And yet, the protagonist seems to need the man's distant gaze in order to see herself as beautiful vicariously through his eyes.

This vicarious pleasure that Ali feels extends once the performance has ended. Sexually charged, she moves to her bedroom and lies in the bed under her sheets. Rubbing herself with a pillow, she thinks, "Sex addicts must feel like this. . . . Rapists, child molesters" (100-01). Instead of understanding the sexual exchange as simply a normal divergence from the sexual mainstream, Ali identifies the pleasure she experiences when being gazed upon as deviant and sexually immoral. María Jesús Hernández Lerena argues in the article "'The Business of Invoking Humanity': Barbara Gowdy and the Fiction Gone (A)stray" that "Ninety-Three Million Miles Away" deals with "forms of deviation from socially determined norms of conduct. . . . We observe the pleasure and punishment derived from the characters' lack of control over their excessive or anomalous bodily needs and demands" (715). Hernández Lerena notes that two other short stories from Gowdy's collection, "We So Seldom Look on Love" and "Flesh of My Flesh," also deal with forms of socio-sexual "deviation" from the norm—necrophilia and transsexualism respectively. Equating her feelings with those of rapists and child abusers, Ali understands her performance and the pleasure she derives from the man's gaze not as a simple departure from her everyday sexual self, but instead as immoral and socially wrong. As Hernández Lerena posits, Ali's negative self-talk is her way of punishing herself for her unconventional behaviour and desires.

Hernández Lerena also notes the lack of control that Gowdy's characters experience in their expression of their uncharacteristic forms of arousal. As was evident in Engel's "The Tattooed Woman," in which the protagonist reclaims her body via her controlled cutting ritual, Ali's use of her body as canvas attempts but fails to overcome her feelings of worthlessness. Just as the Tattooed Woman continues her self-cutting until her husband intervenes with the aid of a health

professional, Ali continues to use her body as canvas past the point of feeling healed or energized. Once Ali awakes from her fretful rest after her first exhibitionist activity, she makes herself lunch, all the while imagining that she is still on display: “Again it was as if her eyes were in his head, although not replacing his eyes. She knew that he wanted her to slip her hand down her sweat pants. She did this. Watching his window, she removed her hand and licked her wet fingers. At that instant she would have paid money for some sign that he was watching” (103). Without any confirmation of the man having seen this sexually explicit act, Ali becomes “suddenly depressed” and filled with a “bleached sadness” (103). Whereas the Tattooed Woman feels calm and in control after her self-injurious behaviour, which no one else initially sees, Ali experiences sadness when her performance is not immediately witnessed.

The next day Ali again paints her nude self-portrait in the sunlight in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the hopes her neighbour will return. Suddenly, the neighbour appears at the window, where his “eyes seemed to enter her head like a drug, and she felt herself aligned with his perspective. She saw herself—surprisingly slender, composed but apprehensive” (105-06). Ali can only see herself when she is being observed from an outside, masculine perspective, which suggests that she seems to have little sense of self-worth. Just as the Tattooed Woman finds cutting exhilarating as a drug that anesthetizes the pain she feels as a result of her husband’s affair, Ali experiences exhilaration at the act of sexual performance for a specific masculine gaze. The body as canvas becomes an offering, a vehicle for self-pleasure and for the pleasure of the observer of the body performance: “I am a gift to him, she thought, opening her legs wider. I am his dream come true. She began to rotate her hips. With the fingers of both hands she spread her labia” (106). Offering her body as gift to the neighbour, she executes her first of many self-pleasuring acts for the benefit of his gaze: “Her body jolted. Her legs shook.

She had never experienced anything like it. Seeing what he saw, she witnessed an act of shocking vulnerability. It went on and on. She saw the charity of her display, her lavish recklessness and submission. It inspired her to the tenderest self-love” (106-07). It is not the exhibitionism that stimulates Ali, but instead her ability to imaginatively see her performance through a masculine gaze. Her body is exhilarating to her only when appreciated in the performance of a sexual act.

Ali’s days come to revolve around this singular purpose of self-stimulation as gift to the gazing neighbour; however, her feelings of happiness and high spirits also allow her to be passionate in bed with her husband. This arrangement of morning exhibitionism suits her sexual needs, so much so that Ali sees no reason to reveal to Claude her masturbatory ritual for the neighbour’s gaze: “[S]he didn’t believe that she was betraying him [Claude] with the man next door. A man who hadn’t touched her or spoken to her, who, as far as she was concerned, existed only from the waist up and who never moved except to pull his drapes, how could that man be counted as a lover?” (107). Ali may feel justified in keeping the liaison between herself and her neighbour a secret from her husband, but these masturbatory escapades begin to alter her relationship with Claude. For both the Tattooed Woman and Ali, the actions of the body canvas place them in a liminal position, dramatically changing and challenging the women’s perceptions of their marriages and their roles within those marriages. Their body modifications situate them as abject, and in so doing destroy the facade of happiness in their marriages.

Like the escalation of the Tattooed Woman’s self-cutting—a little star and a few marks to begin, followed by larger arabesques and trees in more visible places on her body canvas—Ali begins to feel the need to take her performance to new levels in order to feel the same cathartic, exhilarating rush. Eventually needing a greater sense of the intensity of his gaze on her body, she



purchases binoculars to give to the neighbour, whose name, Andrew, she learns from his mailbox. The binoculars, like the carving of the Tattooed Woman's skin in Engel's story, are a means of magnification, an intensification of the performance. While the Tattooed Woman ultimately hides her canvas behind the fern, Ali is desperate for her neighbour to witness her body in even more detail in its sexually explicit state of performance. It is not enough for him simply to gaze at her body; instead, Ali needs to amplify her message so it is not missed or misinterpreted. She becomes even more vulnerable and exposed, while he is even more hidden:

Because most of his face was covered by the binoculars and his hands, she had the impression that he was masked. Her legs shook. When she opened her legs and spread her labia, his eyes crawled up her. She masturbated but didn't come and didn't try to, although she put on a show of coming. She was so devoted to his appreciation that her pleasure seemed like a siphoning of his, an early, childish indulgence that she would never return to. (110)

Now under powerful magnification, the sexual economy is altered between Ali and Andrew, becoming entirely performative and other-centred on the part of Ali. So willing is she to give the entirety of the pleasure to her audience, that she no longer allows herself to reach climax as part of her performance. Her body is a masturbatory canvas for the enjoyment and pleasure of this specific masculine gaze only.

The gifting of the binoculars, however, also renews Ali's sense of the energizing artistry of her body. Although the binoculars are designed to enhance the voyeur's pleasure, the gift is wrapped in brown paper, signifying the contents of the package as shameful or unseemly. This brown paper wrapping suggests that Ali knows her performances would be considered deviant—she calls herself a “certifiable exhibitionist” (101)—yet she cannot stop the sexual exchange,

wanting instead to intensify the act. However, her masturbatory showpiece is transformed into a charade; Ali's orgasms become an act, a simulation of ecstasy for Andrew's eyes. It is in the evenings that Ali is for the first time able to have orgasms with Claude, but only as she imagines a hybrid of Andrew and her husband as her partner:

With this hybrid partner she was able to relax enough to encourage the kind of kissing and movement she needed but had never had the confidence to insist upon. The next morning, masturbating for Andrew, she reached the height of ecstasy, as if her orgasms with him had been the fantasy, and her pretences of orgasm were the real thing. Not coming released her completely into his dream of her. The whole show was for him—cunt, ass, mouth, throat offered to his magnified vision.

(110)

For Ali, then, make-believe and fantasy displayed for a masculine gaze becomes the “real thing.” The actual sexual pleasure she experiences in the evenings with her husband is only possible through her ability to envision a faceless, distant, and mostly unknown man as her partner. The body canvas as showpiece, for both the Tattooed Woman and Ali, allows for invigorating performances that inspire the sense of the self as artistic: “I am an artist now. . . . I am Somebody,” thinks the Tattooed Woman (Engel 8), while Ali continues to work on an actual painting of herself. Nevertheless, the protagonists begin to grow frustrated by the subjective responses of the men who witness their bodies transformed.

In the *Globe and Mail* article “Is this the last female sexual taboo?”, Zosia Bielski explores the topic of female self-stimulation specific to genre and audience. She argues that masturbation by women for their own pleasure alone is still seen as socially unmentionable and unrepresentable: “Largely ignored by sex education and almost entirely unrepresented in pop

culture, female masturbation—solo, not witnessed by a man—may very well be the last remaining sexual taboo. The reasons are plentiful and range from basic anatomy to the shockingly archaic: Think a lingering hyper-awareness of feminine hygiene and a feeling that orgasms are most authentic when they happen with a man” (Bielski). While Ali may be a self-described exhibitionist, performing her sexuality in what she interprets as a deviant fashion, she does not break the masturbation taboo as described by Bielski. Not once does Ali self-pleasure when she is out of sight of her neighbour or outside the presence of her husband. In many ways her self-pleasuring is not about the “self” in any way. Ali’s masturbatory episodes are a gift for men, designed for men’s sexual pleasure, not her own. After all, “[t]he whole show was for him” (110), and she eventually even stops having orgasms as she performs.

Ali begins to interpret her exhibitionism not as a sexual exchange, but instead as art for art’s sake. Her body canvas is produced in order to be witnessed: “Some mornings her episodes with Andrew seemed to have nothing at all to do with lust. They were completely display, wholehearted surrender to what felt like the most inaugural and genuine of all desires, which was not sex but which happened to be expressed through a sexual act” (111). Both the Tattooed Woman and Ali appreciate their bodily canvases as a surrendering and offering to another. The Tattooed Woman explains her reasons for carving her flesh: “I broke my body for him, now I break it for her” (Engel 9). Seeking community too, Ali explains her actions as utterly selfless (111). In performing their bodies, these women surrender themselves up as messages, charitable gifts meant to stimulate Andrew and caution Linda.

There is a turn, however, in Gowdy’s story when Ali dreams that Andrew, who is also a surgeon, is operating on her. She dreams that “[a] tendon encircled her heart, and when he [Andrew] pulled on it she could feel that its other end encircled her vagina, and the uncoiling

there was the most exquisite sensation she had ever experienced. She worried that she would come and that her trembling and spasms would cause him to accidentally stab her. She woke up coming” (111-12). In this second dream, like the first dream in which Ali observes men admiring her nudity on canvas (96), the intimate parts of Ali’s body are viewed and judged by a man. Both male characters in Gowdy’s story are surgeons who perform socially sanctioned body modifications in order to realign women’s bodies with Western ideals of feminine body beautiful (Claude) or in order to realign misfit bodies (Andrew). In the dream, Andrew holds the position of power as he is the active agent, “occasionally drawing a tendon out and dropping it into a petri dish. It was as if he were weeding a garden” (112). In the dream, Ali fears that her pleasure will cause Andrew to “accidentally stab her,” an eerie foreboding symbol of events to come in the narrative. As in the dream, Andrew holds the position of power in their relationship.

The dream influences her future performances with Andrew, consuming her thoughts and thwarting her ability to see her body through his gaze alone: “She found it impossible to shake the dream, even while she was masturbating for Andrew, so that instead of entering *his* dream of her, instead of seeing a naked woman sitting in a pool of morning sun, she saw her sliced-open chest in the shaft of his surgeon’s light” (112). The sexual exchange has surpassed the binocular focus and preternatural lighting to become microscopic and sterile; a man-made “shaft” of light illuminates the inside of her torso. The dream acts as a catalyst to the unwinding of Ali’s exhibitionist routine. While the Tattooed Woman goes to the plaza every day to sit behind a fern and observe the interactions between her husband and his mistress, Ali stoically continues her daily exhibitionist routine of masturbatory performance for her voyeuristic neighbour. However, she grows progressively more restless with her performances: “In the mornings, during her real encounters with Andrew, she became increasingly frustrated until it was all she could do not to

quit in the middle, close the drapes or walk out of the room. And yet if he failed to show up she was desperate (113). Ali's exhibitionism turns from an exhilarating ritual into an almost desperate need to be viewed and appreciated. She no longer finds the gifting of her body to one male's gaze as pleasurable, yet cannot fathom pleasure without his visual appreciation of her body.

The power relationship between Ali and Andrew swings further in favour of Andrew the moment Ali goes to find him at his office in the hospital. Andrew learns her name for the first time and dominates the conversation as Ali is entranced and yet repelled by his embodiment and revelation of impending move from his apartment building: "She stared at his profile. In profile he was a stranger—beak-nosed, round-shouldered. She hated his shoes, his floor, his formal way of speaking, his voice, his profile, and yet her eyes filled and she longed for him to look at her again" (116). In Andrew's office, Ali's illusions are shattered. Not only does she learn that her daily exhibitionist offerings will come to an end, but perhaps most troubling for Ali, she realizes that her gifting of her body canvas was not in fact a charitable offering. Instead, she reinterprets the masturbatory ritual as a selfish act, as attention-seeking approval and a desperate invitation for appreciation.

After the encounter with Andrew at the hospital, Ali returns home, removes her clothes and stands in front of the full-length mirror. Despite how "repellant" she found him, her eyes fill with tears because "without Andrew's appreciation or the hope of it . . . what she saw was a pathetic little woman with pasty skin and short legs" (117). Without approving masculine eyes, Ali can see her body only through her own hypercritical gaze. Ali has used exhibitionism to fill a void of insecurity. In the sanctuary of Andrew's gaze she has been safe from her own self-doubt

and self-criticism. With Andrew putting an end to his patronage, Ali is filled with disparagement for her body and uncertainty about her marriage with Claude.

The short story comes to a close with Ali and Claude sharing what could be considered a moment of quiet contentment as they lie together on the couch watching television. However, the third-person limited narrator reveals how deeply hopeless Ali feels about her future happiness with Claude:

“Let this be enough,” she prayed. But she didn’t believe it ever would be. The world was too full of surprises, it frightened her. As Claude was always saying, things looked different from different angles and in different lights. What this meant to her was that everything hinged on where you happened to be standing at a given moment, or even on who you imagined you were. It meant that in certain lights, desire sprang up out of nowhere. (117)

Ali, like the Tattooed Woman, finally comes to realize that to hinge one’s happiness and sense of self on another person, or on other people, is a futile enterprise. And while in “The Tattooed Woman” there is a sense of hope that she has experienced agency through her self-cutting, Ali’s exhibitionistic performances, while exhilarating in the moment, have opened her eyes to the very limited life she is living. To be so terribly consumed by the approving gaze of another man leaves Ali feeling aware of the void in her life with Claude.

Engel’s “The Tattooed Woman” and Gowdy’s “Ninety-three Million Miles Away” provide fascinating examples of female protagonists performing taboo practices: self-injury and self-pleasure. Inspired by the therapeutic and energizing artistry of their bodies, the protagonists take their art to further heights so that their intended audiences can witness with greater clarity their messages of pain and gifts of pleasure. The Tattooed Woman finds redemptive power in

self-injury, cutting to relieve the devastating emotional turmoil of her husband's extramarital affair. Her cutting also provides the ability to communicate that which she cannot articulate in words and to distance herself from the ideal body through the creation of an abject body. Ali, on the other hand, finds the bodily canvas at first exhilarating, but then too heavily reliant on male patronage and gaze. Instead of feeling calm and in control, like the Tattooed Woman, Ali experiences emotional turmoil and gains little insight into why she needs her body to be appreciated through a masculine gaze. Ali may relish the preternatural light of the masturbatory performance, but it is the Tattooed Woman who, in the confines of her home's darkness and camouflaged behind a fern, realizes self-injury as a cathartic act. She is frustrated by the subjective responses of those who witness her transformed body, and yet the Tattooed Woman declares herself "Somebody" (8) and envisions (with the help of the doctor) how her life may unfold outside of her marriage. Self-injury and self-pleasure of the body canvas communicate a need for appreciation, but only the Tattooed Woman is able to ultimately perform power and experience self-approval under her own gaze and not, as Ali does, via masculine gazes alone. There is hope that the Tattooed Woman's assertion of control over her body will extend far beyond, helping her to see herself as an active agent in her own life as she ventures into the world post-marriage. In opposition to this individual agency, Ali is fixed in a liminal position, unable to see her value or worth as a woman beyond her body's ability to please aesthetically and sexually. These stories are narratives of recovery or attempts at recovery. They reveal that when women take control *of* their bodies, through such means as exhibitionistic self-stimulation or scarification, they recover and claim their sometimes abject bodies as pleasurable. Gowdy's story, like Orbach's concluding statement in *Bodies*, advises that our struggle, like that of Ali's is

to “recorporealise our bodies so that they become a place we live from rather than an aspiration always needing to be achieved” (Orbach 179).



## Conclusion:

### Looking through the Kaleidoscope at the Female Body

Examining these twelve short stories through a kaleidoscope of theoretical perspectives—genre, literary, and body—has established that the female characters use their bodies as instruments to perform power. The female body, when not engaged in satisfying cultural ideals, is represented as having the ability to derive pleasure, satisfaction, and social and relational power. Women characters in these stories by Canadian authors use their bodily experiences to manage and sometimes even rise above that which tyrannizes or hurts them as they engage in private and public physical acts such as disordered eating, self-injury, physical violence, and exposure. The female characters' bodily experiences, such as body modification, nudity, and abjection, demonstrate both the innate power of the corporeal, and the difficulty of controlling the message of their performances and how they are understood by masculine watchers. These women's bodies also function as the canaries in the coal mine, speaking a warning of danger related to socio-cultural and individual oppression. The troubling sense of powerlessness surrounding consent that underlies many of these stories suggests that the female body is open to aggression and even sexual violence.

The short story genre, a literature at the margins (New ix), is an episodic genre that provides room for women writers to explore fictional characters and bodies at the precipice of transition and to write the female experience (Scott 187). The ten women short story writers studied here “‘defamiliarize’ the everyday” (May 133) in the experiences they describe such as body anxiety and/or eating distress, the sometimes difficult relationships between mothers and daughters, and the expression of the sexual self. In these stories, female bodies are sexualized

from almost every single viewpoint: that of their neighbours, their bosses, their mothers, fathers, brothers, and uncles. The female characters are frequently bombarded with unwanted sexual attention that all too commonly develops into horrifying sexual assault that seems inescapable for the female protagonists. Aside from the characters that experience harmful sexual attention, some of the women in these stories yearn for and work towards receiving recognition of their sexual allure, an acknowledgement from a male that indicates attraction and arousal. In Burnard's "Crush," as the unnamed teen female protagonist stands topless in front of the delivery man she simply says, "I wanted to show you" (7). I question, however, whether the "you" the women in these stories want to show is the male whom they desire, or is actually the self. In such self-reflexive moments, some female characters decide to show their mastectomized chest, read in the nude, and masturbate for the voyeur across the way, all consenting to their performances of sexuality. While the socio-cultural margins of women's bodies and sexuality remain limited, these short stories recover and reclaim the body for women, and give voice to women's bodily experiences, sometimes painful, sometimes pleasurable, but always an expression of lived experience. Women write their sexual selves, their body experiences, because "Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous 259). Writing is a powerful reclaiming tool that these authors use in order to raise concerns about the female gendered experience and also to celebrate the extraordinarily remarkable reality of the female body.

### *The Project of the Dissertation*

The first chapter explores transgressive corporeality in Margaret Atwood's "Hairball" and Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North." In "Hairball," Kat's corporeality has gone awry and produced a benign tumour, making her body unstable and "grotesque." In Robinson's story, Adelaine's young female body is out of control, evident in the experience of sexual abuse,

physical violence, and drug abuse. Ultimately each protagonist gifts a symbol of her unruly body: a pseudo-baby in the form of a tumour and a blood clot. The protagonists' gifts rearrange the gendered power relations. These short stories demonstrate that the grotesque can work as a powerful tool, expressing the unspeakable. Using macabre humour, Atwood and Robinson turn misfit portions of their protagonists' bodies not only into symbols of rebellion, but also into the means through the women achieve empowerment. The healing function of the final gifts demonstrates the power gained with body wisdom through an acceptance and use of one's own body dis-order.

Breasts are posited as signifiers of women's sexuality and femininity in Bonnie Burnard's "Nipple Man," Carol Shields's "Eros," and Linda Svendsen's "White Shoulders." In these three short stories, the authors query the female reaction to traumatic breast loss, but more specifically the male characters' sexual response to the pre-surgical and post-surgical female body through reference to the erect and flaccid penis. The bodies of Marion in "Nipple Man," Ann in "Eros," and Irene in "White Shoulders" are transgressive because they do not exemplify the breasted social script. Because the mastectomized chest is transgressive—defying the best breast ideal—the body must be understood as "transient." The body must be realigned to the feminine ideal in order to perform its femininity. However, Marion's, Ann's, and Irene's mastectomized chests or their breast surrogates (such as prostheses) create new possibilities for sexual arousal and satisfaction but also the potential for unhealthy sexual expression and repression. These stories suggest that breasts are more than commodities for heterosexual male arousal yet at the same time are not necessary for female sexual fulfillment. What remains problematic, however, is the notion that post-surgical bodies are transient, are somehow incomplete and unfeminine.

Margaret Atwood and Madeleine Thien question our society's normalizing of eating distress, weight preoccupation, and general body dis-ease. The female characters in Atwood's "Spring Song of the Frogs" and Thien's "Alchemy" fashion not the ideal body beautiful (Orbach, *Bodies* 3), but instead misfit bodies, ones that transgress as parodic extremes. While these parodies apparently conform to the cultural ideal of female body beautiful as thin, they also transgress in their severe exaggeration, and thus highlight the paradox inherent within anorexia and bulimia. While Atwood's short story explores the female quest for thinness as sweeping cultural phenomena, and Thien explores this quest as physical expression and response to sexual abuse, both authors depict eating distress and its repercussions on the body as painful and ultimately ineffective. Without a receptive audience there is no opportunity for the performance to transmit anguish about Western culture's deep-seated misconceptions surrounding the performance of gender. Because members of the intended audience do not understand eating disorders as performative, they are not just unresponsive but also antagonistic to the performance and the resulting asexuality of the performer. These stories by Atwood and Thien serve to reinforce the need to question performances of femininity and the body work that women undertake in the pursuit to approximate body beautiful or transgress that ideal as both a corporeal punishment and as stratagem of rejection of the sexual self.

Elisabeth Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine," Bonnie Burnard's "Crush," and Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge" demonstrate the intergenerational condemnation of and the inability of family members to appreciate an emerging performance of sexuality by teenage girls. The protagonists are deemed by those of other generations as too young, too straitlaced, or too immodest. And yet, the young female characters demonstrate an uninhibited determination to expose their bodies to hetero-male gazes because of

their budding sexuality and perception of ideal female heterosexuality. The three protagonists delve into their performed femininity from a place of lack of knowledge about sex and lack of positive sexual female models. Whether pressured into nudity, or exposing themselves freely without restraint, these nameless protagonists gain a certain degree of agency from their behaviour. At the narratives' conclusions, their performed sexuality—nudity and at times self-stimulation—sometimes brings a new level of agency and provides them with a greater sense of the inherent power of their bodies, as well as a greater knowledge of negative societal perspectives on female sexuality. However, with no inter-generational support for a healthy sexual self, and with the expectation that males will control the sexual encounter, some of the protagonists find little pleasure in their own bodies. What is particularly troubling about these stories' representations of the transition from girlhood to sexual maturity is the necessity for the presence of the masculine gaze as well as the anonymity of the protagonists, who each remain nameless throughout the stories.

In both Marian Engel's "The Tattooed Woman" and Barbara Gowdy's "Ninety-three Million Miles Away," the female protagonists are captivated by the curative and stimulating artistry of their bodies, but are eventually frustrated by the subjective and even abject responses of the male watchers who witness their bodies as they are transformed. In Engel's story, the unnamed protagonist uses her body as canvas; literally, it becomes a site where she can slice through her husband's adultery. Her cutting and scarring are a reclaiming narrative. She understands the artistry of self-cutting as a message to her husband's mistress, in part an act of kinship between the older woman and the younger one. While the artistic act of scarification comforts and calms, ultimately the artistry of the protagonist's corporeal resistance is to no avail. The protagonist of Gowdy's story, Ali, also turns her body into a canvas as she transforms

herself into an object of masculine desire, a performative entity that finds fulfillment in pleasuring a particular masculine gaze. Whereas the Tattooed Woman feels calm and in control after her self-injurious behaviour, Ali experiences sadness when her performance is not immediately witnessed, and reinterprets her masturbatory ritual as a self-centred demand for appreciation and approval. At the end of Engel's story, there is hope that the Tattooed Woman's assertion of control over her body will extend far beyond "pity" and "money" (Engel 9), helping her to see herself as an active agent in her own life. In opposition, Ali in Gowdy's story is fixed in a liminal position, unable to see her value or worth as a woman beyond her body's ability to please aesthetically and sexually.

### *Intersections and Overlap*

In four of the twelve short stories examined in this dissertation, the protagonists remain nameless: Engel's "The Tattooed Woman," Munro's "Wenlock Edge," Burnard's "Crush," and Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine." For some of these stories, the anonymity of the protagonist is an adroit literary construction, as it allows for interchangeability—the protagonist can stand in for a much larger group of women, and readers can perhaps more easily interpose themselves into the same liminal position between "the person they were and the person they want to become" (Pitts 269). Moreover, this anonymity suggests the centrality of these life experiences; thus the teen protagonists in Burnard's "Crush" and Harvor's "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine" represent broader explorations of a girl's sexual awakening as part of the female coming-of-age narrative.

In two of the stories, the characters' names are transformed and altered by themselves or others and play a role in how readers interpret the characters. Kat from Atwood's "Hairball" has gone through multiple incarnations of her name from a "romanticized Katherine," to a "round-

faced Kathy,” to “blunt and no-bullshit” Kath, and finally “sliced herself” down to Kat (45). As discussed in an earlier chapter, the name functions as a metaphor for the protagonist, who wants both to be more powerful and to be an object of sexual consumption. However, Kat has renamed herself, which suggests agency, even if misguided. In Robinson’s “Queen of the North,” Adelaine is given the name Karaoke by her classmates after a drunken episode at a house party. This nickname, related as it is to a limited form of musical expression, suggests Adelaine’s inability to vocalise her own words or message of the abuse she is experiencing. It also presents Adelaine as a medium of perverse entertainment for others, whether for her uncle or her peers. Vikki Visvis asserts that the nickname is evidence of Adelaine’s silence, that it “signifies her muted state” (45). The act of sharing or revealing the transgressions being committed against her body is impractical for Adelaine because of the lack of an appropriate listener. I also argue that the act of singing to pre-recorded music, as karaoke involves, in some ways echoes the colonial relationship between Indigenous communities and the Canadian government, in which governments have set down the regulations—the pre-recorded music and displayed words—and Indigenous people have been forced to follow the constricted and pre-determined track.

In Robinson’s “Queen of the North,” Thien’s “Alchemy,” and Svendsen’s “White Shoulders,” animals function as deft metaphors for incestuous sexual abuse. Robinson’s “Queen of the North” opens with a reference to frogs singing, and Dee Horne argues that, like frogs, in her community, Adelaine “has ceased to sing” and has been “covered up by rocks and gravel, by a hard exterior” (161). Like the frogs, Adelaine is symbolically coated and crushed by her uncle’s sexual abuse, and is unable to speak about the abuse to friends, her boyfriend, or her family. Frogs are also referenced in Atwood’s “Spring Song of the Frogs.” For Will, the “silvery voices” (151) of the frogs represent new possibilities, and he hopes set a romantic mood for his

love interest, Diane. However, these voices sound “thin and ill” (151), like the females Will interacts with in this story. The frogs function as metaphor of the growing “body dis-ease” (Orbach, *Bodies* 15) of the female characters, and, as Will concedes, could actually be toads. Unlike the varied connotations of the word *frog*, the connotation of *toad* is almost always negative—bringing to mind a stout body with warts—and is usually attributed as masculine. As such, the meaning of the metaphor could be understood differently than in my chapter on the story. Since the story is focalised through Will, perhaps he does not take note of or report his own toad-likeness. If Will is a toad, this could very well be the reason Diane is so apprehensive about his advances.

To emphasize their representation of the eating disorders and incestuous abuse in their short stories, Thien and Svendsen utilise animals as motifs to great effect. As symbols of oppression and illness, rabbits, swans, and doves, like the women they stand in for, are becoming more and less prominent. In “Alchemy,” the rabbits are being fattened up only so that they can be slaughtered and eaten. In this story, the relationship between Paula’s mother and the rabbits is parallel to the way Paula’s body is metaphorically preyed upon and consumed by her father. Paula’s whisper to the rabbits, “Be free or be stew” (61), foreshadows her decision to run away in order to prevent her father’s further sexual abuse of her. In Svendsen’s “White Shoulders,” Jill, like Adelaine and Paula, is experiencing sexual abuse perpetrated by a relative, her father. Jill is also associated with animals, in this case two birds: the swan and the dove. When the narrator, Jill’s aunt Adele, introduces Jill to the reader, she is described as having “[h]er soft straw-coloured hair . . . pulled back with a swan barrette” (149), with the downcast swan mirroring the unhappiness and dejection of Jill herself. Later in the narrative Jill is spied sitting disheveled on a city bench, “clicking a barrette open, closed, open, closed” (160), emulating the



tick-tock of a clock, suggesting her interior turmoil about her inability to end her father's abuse. At the story's end as Jill lies in the casket, her hair is pinned back with a dove barrette, a symbol of peace (164). Jill has avoided both further confrontation with her parents and her father's sexual abuse by ending her own life, liberating her body completely and finding peace, but at a terrible cost.

Just as nicknames and animals intersect in the analyses of these stories, food and consumption also play a pivotal role. In Atwood's "Hairball," the female body not only consumes, but turns out to be consumable as well. There are hints early in the text that the body is an object of consumption, such as the similes linking Kat's Hairball to grapefruit and coconut. The most obvious indication of the corporeal as edible is made by the protagonist when she explains her name to Gerald using sexually suggestive overtones related to a KitKat chocolate bar that "[m]elts in your mouth" (49). Here Kat uses her body as a culinary tool to gain both a job and a lover. Gerald himself is described as having been given a "hunger to impress" (50) when he purchases a box of chocolates for Kat after their first sexual encounter. After her surgery to remove Hairball, Kat shows up at work unannounced, only to be overcome by the sexual pull she feels towards Gerald; he wears a "lick-my-neck" shirt and an "eat-your-heart-out" sweater (54). The clothing signals a changing of the guard as the master has been replaced in her absence by the apprentice. The clothes signify power and indicate Kat's sudden sense of powerlessness (55). This sense of powerlessness is fleeting as Kat ultimately creates a greater sense of body wisdom through her rebellious and transgressive act, turning Hairball into a travesty of a truffle, hinting again of this theme of body as macabre consumable.

In Burnard's short story "Crush," bread is used as metaphor for fertility, reproduction, and life. After seeing the young woman's naked upper body, Adam imagines touching her

breasts but is jolted into reality when a crow begins pecking its beak into a loaf of bread. When the story is focalised through Adam, the scavenger crow is the stand-in for the penis and the bread as the female sex. However, when focalised through the unnamed protagonist, the bread is understood as the male sex: “two loaves of white and one whole wheat” (7). The bread in the shape of the phallus symbolizes virility and the possibility of sexual impropriety. When Adam sees the protagonist’s naked breasts, he significantly forgets to leave his bread, suggesting that he realizes the indecency of acting on his desire for this teenage girl.

Many of the authors studied in this dissertation experiment in their stories with lighting, as paralyzing, strengthening, or focusing. For example, during one of their many sleepovers, Miriam and Paula in Thien’s “Alchemy” play with the hutch rabbits, with Paula trying to entice them to freedom. When a light comes on in her parents’ bedroom, symbol of the father’s power and dominance, Paula drops a rabbit over the veranda railing (67). This death, read as either an act of mercy or murder, jolts Paula into taking steps to ending her father’s sexual abuse permanently by running away from home.

In Gowdy’s “Ninety-Three Million Miles Away,” the interplay between light and dark presents the female body in joyous sunshine and the male body in darkness. And yet, the light and its “preternatural brightness” (99) stands in for the masculine gaze, which the protagonist, Ali, needs in order to see herself as beautiful. As she stands in the spotlight of the sunshine, the rays of sun focus attention on her body, aiding her to experience a different part of her sexual self. However, Ali then begins to imagine her masturbatory performance through Andrew’s eyes: “instead of seeing a naked woman sitting in a pool of morning sun, she saw her sliced-open chest in the shaft of his surgeon’s light” (112). The lighting has shifted from one that spotlights and celebrates the body on a stage to one that suggests a sterile operating room. This intense and

microscopic vision of the female protagonist's body implies her apprehension about being judged and assessed by the masculine gaze. If all she could see was a "pathetic little woman with pasty skin and short legs" (117), how could her cosmetic-surgeon husband see her as "very lovely" (117)? At the end of the narrative, her prayer, "Let this be enough" (117) implies her recognition that her body and her position in her marriage are under a spotlight, while her husband and her society dissect the female body and gender performance from the confines and safety of the outside shadows.

### *Further Areas of Research*

In this dissertation, I focus on twelve short stories published in the late 1970s through the early twenty-first century by ten Canadian women writers. My decisions of inclusion are based primarily on whether or not a story raises a bodily concern in a compelling fashion, particularly if the story touches on the relationship between a character's body and her sexuality, class, culture, age, or ability. I work with texts that I find hurtful or delightful, that produce such strong effects that I continue to think about them long after I have finished reading. However, because of the necessarily limited scope of this study, many accomplished and relevant works of short fiction have been omitted.

My study has focused on stories about women in heterosexual relationships, mostly written by EuroCanadian authors. It would be fascinating to extend this analysis by exploring sexualized bodies in Canadian short fiction by lesbian writers, transgendered women writers, Indigenous women writers other than Robinson, (dis)abled women writers, Canadian women writers of the diaspora, women writers of specific regions, women writers from earlier time periods, immigrant women writers, and first-generation Canadian women writers other than Thien and Harvor. For example, a study of sexualized bodies in Canadian lesbian writers' short

fiction could explore such works as Jane Rule's *Inland Passage and Other Stories* (1985), Dionne Brand's *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988), and Hiromi Goto's *Hopeful Monsters: Stories* (2004). Such studies would build a more nuanced awareness of writers—and some characters—who are marginalized for their differences. It is my hope that I and other literary scholars continue to study and critique the depiction of women's bodies in Canadian literature in order to build kinship, raise awareness, and ultimately improve both women's relationships with their own bodies and broaden societal perspectives on women's bodies.

The theories of *l'écriture féminine* of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray uncovered a need not only for women to write their own literature, to write themselves and their bodies into existence, but also to raise questions about why the female body is understood within patriarchal culture as abject, and ultimately how to break down such socially constructed ideas of the body, sex, and gender in order to perform power. Judith Butler's theoretical perspective of gender as a performative strategy (190) provides a starting place for an understanding of the ways in which gender is a "stylized repetition of acts" (191) and not something innate or inborn. Exploring both the female bodies in these stories by Canadian women and the gendered performances of the female characters illustrates a very narrow, culturally prescribed female corporeal existence and a very limited avenue to perform or achieve power. As these stories demonstrate, women's bodies can, and frequently are, shamed for being too much—too sexy, too unstable, too provocative, too young, or too old—or shamed for being not enough—not fleshy enough to be sexually appealing, not feminine enough without breasts. To be female and feminine for the characters in these stories is like walking a tightrope with the sensitivities of Western culture holding one end of the tightrope and a hetero-male's sensibility holding the other end. Because shame is stirred up in response to negative assessments, women experience

bodily “dis-ease” creating the conditions for a perfect storm of self-injury and disempowerment. Their “bodily instability” (Orbach, *Bodies* 15, 8) demonstrates the impossibility of achieving an ideal aesthetic and the ramifications of the ensuing anxious embodiment that women can and do experience. But as some of the female characters demonstrate in these stories, bodies can be a place of recovery and reclamation of that which is considered abject, performing a greater spectrum of power by creating new opportunities for “body wisdom” (Miedema, Stoppard, and Anderson 313), agency, and *jouissance* in and of the body.

## Works Cited

- Aapola, Sinikka, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris. "Sexuality and the Body: Old Binaries and New Possibilities." *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*. Ed. Jo Campling. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 132-65. Print.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Hairball." *Wilderness Tips*. 1991. Toronto: McClelland, 1998. 39-59. Print.
- . "Spring Song of the Frogs." *Bluebeard's Egg*. 1983. New York: Random, 1998. 139-51. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helen Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968. Print.
- Bemrose, John. "Enriching a Fictional Universe." Rev. of *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, by Carol Shields. *Maclean's* 113.12 (2000): 66. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.
- Bennett, Donna. "English Canada's Postcolonial Complexities." *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*. Ed. Cynthia Sugars. Peterborough: Broadview, 2004. 107-38. Print.
- Beran, Carol L. "Strangers within the Gates: Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*." *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Sharon Rose Wilson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2003. 74-87. Print.
- Bielski, Zosia. "Is This the Last Female Sexual Taboo?" *The Globe and Mail*, 11 Aug. 2011. Web. 11 Aug. 2011.
- Blake, Patricia. "Books: Life Studies *Bluebeard's Egg* and Other Stories." Rev. of *Bluebeard's Egg*, by Margaret Atwood. *Time Magazine* 12 Jan. 1987. *EBSCO*. Web. 12 Sept. 2011.
- "Booby Bracer." *Lululemon*. Web. 1 Oct. 2014.

- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. 1993. Berkeley: California UP, 2003. Print.
- Brady, Elizabeth. *Marian Engel and Her Works*. Toronto: ECW, 1989. Print.
- . Rev. of *The Tattooed Woman*, by Marian Engel. *Canadian Woman Studies* 8.1 (1987): 95-96. Print.
- Brand, Dionne. *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. Stratford: Williams-Wallace, 1988. Print.
- Bray, Abigail. *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Burnard, Bonnie. *Casino and Other Stories*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994. Print.
- . Contributors: Bonnie Burnard. *Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told*. Ed. Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson. Toronto: Vintage, 2001. Print.
- . "Crush." Burnard *Casino and Other Stories* 1-13.
- . "It Almost Always Starts This Way." Lynch and Robbeson 9-16.
- . "Nipple Man." Burnard *Casino and Other Stories* 129-41.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Byrne, Kathleen. Rev. of *Casino and Other Stories*, by Bonnie Burnard. *Quill and Quire* 60.5 (1994): 22. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.
- Cameron, Elspeth. "Femininity, or Parody of Autonomy: Anorexia Nervosa and *The Edible Woman*." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20.2 (1985): 45-69. Print.

- Campbell, Wanda. "Of Kings and Cabbages: Short Stories by Early Canadian Women." Lynch and Robbeson 17-26.
- Carrera Suarez, Isabel. "'Yet I Speak, Yet I Exist': Affirmation of the Subject in Atwood's Short Stories." *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. Ed. Colin Nicholson. Hong Kong: St. Martin's, 1994. 230-47. Print.
- Chiu, Jeannie. Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *Amerasia* 30.2 (2004): 115-17. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham: Rowman, 2000. 257-75. Print.
- Craske, Matthew. *William Hogarth*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.
- Cromptvoets, Samantha. *Breast Cancer and the Post-Surgical Body: Recovering the Self*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006. Print.
- "Dancing with Words." Rev. of *Simple Recipes* by Madeleine Thien. *Maclean's* 9 Sept. 2002: 26. EBSCO. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "Negotiating *Wilderness Tips*." *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*. Ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen. New York: MLA of America, 1996. 180-86. Print.
- Davies, Madeleine. "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies." *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 58-71. Print.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. 1952. Trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.



- DeFalco, Amelia. "Caretakers/Caregivers: Economies of Affection in Alice Munro." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 58.3 (2012): 377-98. *EBSCO*. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.
- DeKoven, Marianne. "Modernism and Gender." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Ed. Michael Levenson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 174-93. Print.
- Di Michele, Mary. Rev of *Desire: In Seven Voices*, ed. Lorna Crozier. *Books in Canada* 30.1 (2001): 20. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.
- Early, Len, and Michael Peterman, eds. Introduction. *Collected Short Stories of Isabella Valancy Crawford*. London: Canadian Poetry, 2009. Print.
- Engel, Marian. *The Tattooed Woman*. Markham: Penguin, 1985. Print.
- . "The Tattooed Woman." Engel 1-9.
- Fagan, Kristina. "Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 34.1 (2009): 204-26. *Érudit*. Web. 21 Jan. 2011.
- Ferguson, Suzanne C. "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form." May, ed. 218-30.
- Fiamengo, Janice. "Linda Svendsen's Marine Life: Undoing Narrative Consolation." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23.2 (1998): 1-18. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.
- Findley, Timothy. Preface. *The Tattooed Woman*. Markham: Penguin, 1985. vii-ix. Print.
- Frost, Liz. *Young Women and the Body: A Feminist Sociology*. Great Britain: Palgrave, 2001. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. Conclusion. *Literary History of Canada*. 1965. Rpt. in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: Anansi, 1971. 213-51. Print.
- "Gallows Humour." *OED*. Web. 4 March 2011.
- Gadpaille, Michelle. *The Canadian Short Story*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

- Garay, Kathy. "Marian Engel: A Life in Writing." *Historical Perspectives on Canadian Publishing*. Web. 27 Aug. 2014.
- Gay, Kathlyn, and Christine Whittington. *Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarification*. Brookfield, Connecticut: Millbrook P, 2002. Print.
- Gerson, Carole. "Susan Francis Harrison." *Canadian Writers Before 1890*. Ed. W. H. New. Detroit: Gale, 1990. Web. 21 October 2015.
- Giese, Rachel. "Merchant of Menace." *CBC*. 26 Jan. 2006. Web. 18 July 2006.
- Gimlin, Debra L. *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. Print.
- Gingell, Susan, ed. Introduction. "Textualizing Orature and Orality." Spec. issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* 83 (2004): 1-18. Print.
- Givner, Joan. Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *The Malahat Review* 1.135 (2001): 125-28. Print.
- Glenny, Allie. *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. Print.
- Goldman, Marlene. "Margaret Atwood's "Hairball": Apocalyptic Cannibal Fiction." *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2005. 83-100. Print.
- Goto, Hiromi. *Hopeful Monsters: Stories*. Vancouver: Arsenal, 2004. Print.
- . Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *Herizons* 15.4 (2002): 34-35. *EBSCO*. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.
- Gowdy, Barbara. Interview with Gabriella Skubincan. *Blood and Aphorisms* 23 (1996): 37-39. Print.
- . "Ninety-three Million Miles Away." Gowdy *We So Seldom Look on Love* 95-117.

- . *We so Seldom Look on Love*. Toronto: Somerville House, 1996. Print.
- Greene, Gayle. "Survival Strategies." Rev. of *Wilderness Tips*, by Margaret Atwood. *The Women's Review of Books* 9.4 (1992): 6-7. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. Paladin: London, 1970. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.
- Haggas, Carol. Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *Booklist* 1 May 2002: 1511. *EBSCO*. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.
- Hallett, Mark. "Design for Life: The Analysis of Beauty." *Hogarth*. London: Phaidon, 2000. 235-60. Print.
- Hammill, Faye. *Canadian Literature*. Edinburgh Critical Guides to Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. Print.
- . "The Republic of Love and Popular Romance." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2003. 61-83. Print.
- Hampson, Sarah. "What the Pirelli Pin-Up Calendar Really Tells Us (Hint: Power is Always an Aphrodisiac)." *The Globe and Mail* 1 Dec. 2015. Web. 2 Dec. 2015.
- Hansen, Jennifer. "There Are Two Sexes, Not One: Luce Irigaray." *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham: Rowman, 2000. 201-06. Print.
- Harvor, Elisabeth. Interview by Anne Compton. "The Theatre of the Body: Extreme States in Elisabeth Harvor's Poetry." *Canadian Literature* 183 (2004): 13-27. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Sept. 2015.

- . Interview by Laurie Kruk. "A Humiliation A Day." *The Antigone Review* 90 (1992): 143-62. Print.
- . "One Whole Hour (Or Even More) with Proust and Novocaine." Moore ed. 153-58.
- Hernández Lerena, María Jesús. "'The Business of Invoking Humanity': Barbara Gowdy and the Fiction Gone (A)stray." *U of T Quarterly* 72.3 (2003): 715-35. *EBSCO*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
- Hogarth, William. *The Shrimp Girl*. 1740-1745. Oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Horne, Dee. "Trapped Tales." Rev. of *Traplines*, by Eden Robinson. *Canadian Literature* 156 (1998): 160-62. Print.
- Hornor, Gail. "Sexual Behavior in Children: Normal or Not?" *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 18.2 (2004): 57-64. *SciVerse*. Web. 10 September. 2012.
- Howells, Coral Ann. "On Gender and Writing: Marian Engel's *Bear* and *The Tattooed Woman*." *Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature: Feminism and Postcolonialism*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter. Philadelphia: Open UP, 1991. 71-81. Print.
- Hoy, Helen. "'How Should I Eat These?' Eden Robinson's *Traplines*." *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2001. 153-82. Print.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Minuit, 1977. Print.
- James-French, Dayv. "Connected Episodes." Rev of *Marine Life*, by Linda Svendsen. *Books in Canada* 21.5 (1992): 15-16. *EBSCO*. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.
- Jones, Rachel. *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011. Print.

- Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times; Lives Encapsulated in Margaret Atwood Stories." Rev. of *Wilderness Tips*, by Margaret Atwood. *The New York Times* 26 Nov. 1991: 18. EBSCO. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Kinsella, W. P. Interview. "W.P. Kinsella is always back." *BC Bookworld* (Spring 1997): 7-8. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. "From Filth to Defilement." *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP. 1982. 56-89. Print.
- . *Women's Time*. 1981. *French Feminism Reader*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Lanham: Rowman, 2000. 181-200. Print.
- Kulperger, Shelley. "Loss of Mother/hood: Maternalising Postcolonial Cultural Memory." *Hecate* 33.1 (2007): 223-42. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.
- Laurence, Margaret. *A Bird in the House*. 1963. Toronto: McClelland, 1989. Print.
- Lohafer, Susan and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds. *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. Print.
- Luft, Joanna. "Boxed In: Alice Munro's 'Wenlock Edge' and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 35.2 (2010): 103-26. Print.
- Lynch, Gerald. *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001. Print.
- Lynch, Gerald, and Angela Arnold Robbeson, eds. *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*. Reappraisals: Canadian Writers. 22. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1999. Print.
- MacLeod, Alistair. "The Canadian Short Story." Lynch and Robbeson 161-66.

- Marcus, James. "Canadian Psychos." Rev. of *Traplines*, by Eden Robinson. *New York Times Book Review* 24 Nov. 1996: BR21. *EBSCO*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Matthews, Brander. "The Philosophy of the Short-Story." May, ed. 73-80.
- May, Charles E. "Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read." *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*. Ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004. Print.
- , "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction." May, ed. 131-43.
- , ed. *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. Print.
- Mayrhofer, Andrea. *The Practice of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: A Sociological Enquiry*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011. Print.
- McAfee, Noëlle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- McNamara, Eugene. Rev. of *The Tattooed Woman*, by Marian Engel. *Queen's Quarterly* 93.4 (1986): 886-87. Print.
- Metcalf, John. *Kicking Against the Pricks*. Downsview: ECW, 1982. Print.
- Miedema, Baukje, Janet M. Stoppard, and Vivienne Anderson, eds. *Women's Bodies/Women's Lives: Health, Well-Being and Body Image*. Women's Issues Publishing Program. Toronto: Sumach, 2000. Print.
- Miller, Judith Maclean. "Asking the Question." Introduction. *Reading/Writing Canada: Short Fiction and Nonfiction*. Ed. Miller. New York: Norton, 2005. ix-xviii. Print.
- Moore, Lisa, ed. *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Canadian Women's Short Stories*. Toronto: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Moore, Lisa. "Getting Away with It." Introduction. Moore, ed. ix-xvii.
- Munro, Alice. *The Love of a Good Woman: Stories*. Toronto: McClelland, 1998. Print.

---. "Wenlock Edge." Moore, ed. 219-46.

New, W. H. *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989. Print.

Nichter, Mimi. "Fat Talk." *Fat Talk: What Girls and their Parents Say about Dieting*. Harvard UP: Cambridge, 2000. 45-67. Print.

Nimura, Janice P. "Northwest Orient." Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *New York Times Book Review* 29 Sept. 2002, late ed.: BR23. EBSCO. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.

Orbach, Susie. *Bodies*. Picador: New York, 2009. Print.

---. *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide for Women and Fat is a Feminist Issue II*. Arrow: London, 1998. Print.

---. *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age*. Norton: New York, 1986. Print.

Pitts, Victoria. "Reclaiming the Female Body: Women Body Modifiers and Feminist Debates." *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance and Behaviour*. Ed. Rose Weitz. New York: Oxford, UP, 2010. 268-82. Print.

Poe, Edgar Allan. Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Graham Magazine* May (1842): n. pag. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

---. "Poe on Short Fiction." May, ed. 59-72.

Price, Janet, and Margrit Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Rev. of *Casino and Other Stories*, by Bonnie Burnard. *Books in Canada* 23.4 (1994): 48. ProQuest. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.

- Rev. of *Casino and Other Stories*, by Bonnie Burnard. *Quill and Quire* 60.5 (1994): 22. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Oct. 2014.
- Rice, Carla. *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2014. Print.
- Robinson, Eden. "Queen of the North." *Traplines*. Toronto: Vintage, 1996. 185-215. Print.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The Annunciation*. 1849-1850. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Rule, Jane. *Inland Passage and Other Stories*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1985. Print.
- Scott, Gail. "Shaping a Vehicle for Her Use: Women and the Short Story." *In the Feminine: Women and Words*. Edmonton: Longspoon, 1985. 184-91. Print.
- "Self-Injury." *Canadian Mental Health Association*. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.
- Shapira, Yael. "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque." *Narrative* 18.1 (2010): 51-72. *EBSCO*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Shields, Carol. *Dressing Up for the Carnival: Short Stories*. Toronto: Random, 2000. Print.
- . "Eros." *Dressing Up for the Carnival* 205-20.
- . Interview by Laurie Kruk. "Carol Shields: 'Inhabiting the World.'" *The Voice is the Story: Conversations with Canadian Writers of Short Fiction*. Oakville: Mosaic, 2003. 192-206. Print.
- . "Is There a Feminine Voice in Literature?" *How Stories Mean*. Eds. John Metcalf and J.R. Struthers. Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1993. 84-86. Print.
- . Rev. of *A Good House*, by Bonnie Burnard. *The Ottawa Citizen* 5 Sept. 1999: C12. *ProQuest* Web. 26 Oct. 2015.
- . *Various Miracles*. 1985. Toronto: Vintage, 1995. Print.



Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Picador: New York, 1990.

Print.

Steinberg, Sybil. Rev. of *Marine Life*, by Linda Svendsen. *Publishers Weekly* 25 May 1992: 38.

Print.

---. "Traplines." Rev. of *Traplines*, by Eden Robinson. *Publishers Weekly* 5 Aug. 1996: 429.

*ProQuest*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.

Stringam, Jean. "Present But Unaccounted For: The Canadian Young Adult Short Story of the Nineteenth Century Comes of Age." Lynch and Robbeson 53-64.

Sullivan, Rosemary. Introduction. *The Pool in the Desert*. By Sara Jeannette Duncan. Ed. Gillian Siddall. Peterborough: Broadview, 2001. 11-16. Web.

Svendsen, Linda. *Marine Life*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: Toronto 1992. Print.

---. "White Shoulders." *Marine Life* 145-65.

Swann, Brian, ed. *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of Native Literatures of North America*. New York: Random, 1994. Print.

Sweetman, Paul. "Only Skin Deep? Tattooing, Piercing and the Transgressive Body." *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture*. Ed. Michele Aaron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. 165-87. Print.

Thacker, Robert. "Mapping Munro: Reading the 'Clues.'" *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*. Lynch and Robbeson 127-35.

Thien, Madeleine. "Alchemy." Thien *Simple Recipes* 55-76.

---. Interview by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. "Madeleine Thien: Writer-in-Residence, Simon Fraser University." *In-Sight*. 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 13 Aug. 2014.

---. *Simple Recipes*. Toronto: McClelland, 2001. Print.

- Timson, Judith. "Bad Boys and Indians." Rev. of *Traplines*, by Eden Robinson. *Maclean's* 12 Sept. 1996: 68. *EBSCO*. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- . Rev. of *Let Me Be The One*, by Elisabeth Harvor. *Maclean's* 109.47 (1996): 82. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.
- Towers, Robert. "Old-Fashioned Virtues, Bohemian Vices." Rev. of *Bluebeard's Egg*, by Margaret Atwood. *New York Times Book Review* 23 Nov. 1986, late ed.: BR11. *EBSCO*. Web. 12 Sept. 2011.
- Van Styvendale, Nancy. "Indigenous Storytelling." Rev. of *The Sasquatch at Home: Traditional Protocols and Modern Storytelling*, by Eden Robinson. *Canadian Literature* 219 (Winter 2013): 147. *EBSCO*. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.
- . "Naming as Performative Re-Membering in Eden Robinson's 'Queen of the North.'" *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 9.1 (2002): 93-104. Print.
- Verbin, Analu. "Anorexia as Parody: Postmodern Feminism and the Paradoxes of Anorexia." *Madness: Probing the Boundaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, Forthcoming. 2011. 39-57. Print.
- Verduyn, Christl. "Explod/ing/ed Fictions: Marian Engel's Writing." *Atlantis* 14.1 (Fall 1988): 13-19. Print.
- Visvis, Vikki. "Beyond the 'Talking Cure': The Practical Joke as Testimony for Intergenerational Trauma in Eden Robinson's 'Queen of the North.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29.2 (2004): 37-61. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 Jan. 2011.
- Waxman, Jamye. *Getting Off: A Woman's Guide to Masturbation*. Berkeley: Seal Press. 2007. Print.
- Weiss, Allan. "Rediscovering the Popular Canadian Short Story." *Dominant Impressions: Essays on the Canadian Short Story*. Lynch and Robbeson 87-97.

- Weitz, Rose, ed. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance and Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Wickens, Barbara. "A Literary Star is Born." Rev. of *Traplines*, by Eden Robinson. *Maclean's* 20 Nov. 1995: 13. EBSCO. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Wilcox, James. "The Hairball on the Mantelpiece." Rev. of *Wilderness Tips*, by Margaret Atwood. *New York Times Book Review* 24 Nov. 1991: 7. EBSCO. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.
- Wright, Austin M. "On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question" Lohafer and Clarey, eds. 46-53.
- Yalom, Marilyn. *A History of the Breast*. London: Harper Collins, 1997. Print.
- York, Lorraine. "Large Ceremonies: The Literary Celebrity of Carol Shields." *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Ed. Marta Dvořák and Manina Jones. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007. 238-55. Print.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling." *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 75-96. Print.
- Zaleski, Jeff. Rev. of *Simple Recipes*, by Madeleine Thien. *Publishers Weekly* 3 June 2002: 62. EBSCO. Web. 6 Sept. 2011.
- Zitzelsberger, Hilde M. "Sylvie: A Reflection on Embodiments and Transformations." *Radical Psychology: A Journal of Psychology, Politics and Radicalism* 8.1 (2009): 11. EBSCO. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.